



Understanding Putin Through a Middle Eastern Looking Glass

by John W. Parker



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Cover: Vladimir Putin, right, and Bashar al-Asad shake hands in Moscow, December 19, 2006. Putin hosted Asad for talks focusing on tensions among Palestinians, Lebanon's political standoff, and stalled Middle East peacemaking
(AP Photo/Mikhail Klementiev, ITAR-TASS, Presidential Press Service)

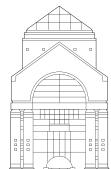
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Executive Summary

The resurgence of Russian influence in the Middle East has surprised Moscow as much as any other capital. Russia has done better than the Kremlin and its Middle East experts feared when the Arab Spring began. Despite Moscow's deep involvement in the Ukrainian crisis, Russia is now in a stronger position with national leaderships across the Middle East than it was in 2011, although its stock with Sunni Arab public opinion has been sinking.

The instrumental value of the region for demonstrating that the United States has to take Russia's interests into account in the Middle East and beyond is more important than ever to the Kremlin and to Russian President Vladimir Putin's political legitimacy as a strong leader at home. It counts for more than any uptick in weapons sales or other economic deals in the region.

The confluence of four streams of developments in late 2011 sparked the dramatic turnaround in the Russian approach to Syria and shaped it along the lines with which we are now familiar. First was the Russian reaction to the Western campaign against Libya. Second was the political turbulence inside Russia itself and Putin's embrace of a platform of opposition to U.S. policy, particularly in the Middle East, to help him recover his political footing as he faced presidential elections in early March 2012. Third was the sharp increase in Israeli and American threats to strike Iranian nuclear enrichment facilities. Fourth was the spike in Saudi—as well as Qatari and Turkish—activism against the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria.

The consistency of Putin's approach to the Syrian conflict and Moscow's unexpected success in holding its own against Washington led to the perception in Moscow of growing respect from leaderships in the Middle East, even in countries such as Saudi Arabia, not favorably disposed toward Russia. By Russian accounts, leaders in these countries began to believe that Russia needed to be dealt with, even if this strained relations with Washington. As a result, some regional capitals started to consult more closely with Russia, to lobby for its support, and to return to the Russian arms market, while others resumed high-level exploratory contacts.

In the meantime, one of the unintended consequences of the increased direct pressure on Iran and of the indirect pressure on Iran through Syria was the drawing together of Moscow and Tehran. As a result of Russia's obsession with suspected Saudi-sponsored Sunni terrorism and of the dynamics of the Syrian crisis, Russia drifted toward an implicit soft alliance with Shia-governed states in the region: Iran, Syria, and Iraq. Moscow more than ever began to regard Iran as a “natural barrier” against Sunni extremism rising out of the Middle East to threaten Russian interests to the north.

By early February 2014, the Middle East was still not a top economic priority for Russia, but had become a prestige priority of sorts because it turned out to be a highly successful part of Russian diplomacy. Putin seemed to be on a roll. Russia's veto power in the United Nations (UN) Security Council and naval shuttle of weapons and spare parts to the Asad regime had discouraged the use of U.S. force against Syria as well as Iran. The Russian president also had what seemed like a deal with Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to draw Ukraine closer to Russia and away from the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Winter Olympics in Sochi (February 7–23) went off well, with no terrorist attacks.

Toward the end of February, however, when the deal with Yanukovich collapsed, Putin's success in Syria helped set the table for his approach to the Ukrainian crisis. The Russian president's experience in the Middle East gave him the confidence to annex Crimea in March, and soon to extend Russian military assistance to pro-Russian forces in Donetsk and Luhansk in southeastern Ukraine.

There were several Syrian dimensions to Putin's decision to go into Crimea. The momentum of his success in competing with Western leaders to reestablish Russia as a major player in the Middle East carried him forward into Ukraine. Security dimensions were also strong motivating factors in both theaters: in Syria, it was the threat of radical Sunni Islam moving north out of the Middle East to Russia; in Ukraine, it was the imperative to keep NATO from moving farther eastward.

Mixed in with security motives were also Putin's domestic political needs: both in Syria and then in Crimea and southeastern Ukraine he used opposition to American policy to bolster the image of Russia as a restored great power and, not coincidentally, to buck up his approval ratings among the Russian public.

Finally, there has been a similarity in Russian military ways and means used in both theaters: Russian navy ships have been semi-covertly transferring military hardware and supplies to the beleaguered Asad regime since spring 2013; in Crimea and then southeastern Ukraine, Russia has employed similar methods not only to supply military material to local pro-Russian fighters, but even to insert Russian soldiers.

After the bloodless annexation of Crimea, some observers suggested that Syria had lost its importance to Putin as a venue for bolstering his ratings at home because his Ukrainian gambit was doing this much more effectively. But the Middle East, including Syria, now acquired another important function: to demonstrate that Russia is not an international "pariah." Especially after the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH 17 in July 2014 and the more open Russian military intervention in southeastern Ukraine in August, Putin has used his contacts in the

Middle East not only to help him soften the impact of Western economic sanctions, but also to avoid international isolation.

Russia's gains in the Middle East have not only held fast as the Ukrainian conflict has flared, but even matured. Given the general perception of American weakness in the region, particularly after Syria's Asad crossed President Obama's "red line" on chemical weapons use without eliciting a military response, friction between Moscow and Washington has meant more room for maneuver for capitals in the Middle East. Even if they still recognize that the United States remains the most formidable power in the region, they all have little incentive to spite Russia over Ukraine.

Syria, of course, depends heavily on Russia's UN Security Council veto to impede any concerted international effort to ease the Asad regime from power. Moreover, whereas 3 years ago it appeared that Russia itself was being eased out of the Middle East, Moscow is now potentially the key actor in seeking a political solution to the Syrian crisis.

Elsewhere, Israel has pursued neutrality over the Ukraine conflict. This may now change in the wake of Putin's decision on April 13 to revive the transfer of S-300 air defense systems to Iran, but few in Moscow see this as likely. Iran itself has few equities in Ukraine and little reason to roil waters with Russia, a key and sometimes sympathetic player in the nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 countries (the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany).

In Iraq, Putin's reaction to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) threat was quicker than Washington's and was appreciated by both the Nouri al-Maliki and Haider al-Abadi administrations. With Egypt, relations between Cairo and Moscow have flourished all through the Ukrainian crisis.

Saudi Arabia and Russia have increased contacts despite deep divisions over Syria, new differences over Yemen, competing global energy interests, and longstanding mutual distrust. Rumored Saudi funding of Egyptian arms purchases from Russia might prove to be the bridge over these and other differences to better relations between Moscow and Riyadh.

Finally, Putin and Turkey's President Recip Tayyip Erdogan seem determined not to let differences over Syria, Crimea, and now the Armenian genocide issue disrupt booming economic ties.

While Putin has been lucky, he has also benefited from the West's mistakes and intervention fatigue. As a result of these realities and Russia's focused political will, Moscow continues to punch above its weight in the Middle East. But the Middle East is still not a top priority for Russia. Even more since the onset of the Ukraine crisis, countries such as China and India far outrank the Middle East as global geopolitical priorities.

Moscow most certainly wants to maintain relations with all in the region and sell weapons to any country that will pay for them, but Russia will not put boots on the ground anywhere. In this sense, Russian policy in the Middle East remains deeply conservative. As Moscow sees it, there are simply too many problems in the region and no solutions. Its policy will thus continue to be focused on keeping these problems as far away from Russia as possible.

Nevertheless, the Western reaction to Russian actions in Ukraine has given Putin a greater incentive to work toward a more significant Russian profile in the Middle East, in part to compensate for Western sanctions but foremost to demonstrate that Russia remains a great power in the world. And, as Moscow sees it, this impulse by Putin is being reciprocated in the region.

No outside power, including the United States, may be up to—or even able to play—a controlling role in the region any longer. But realism restrains all sides from believing that Russia is anywhere close to eclipsing the major role the United States still plays in the Middle East. Nevertheless, Putin appears intent on providing more of a choice for the region than has existed since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Preface

In 2010, a few months after joining the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) at the National Defense University (NDU), I began what would turn out to be a series of fairly regular visits to Moscow. These continued during a 2013–2014 parallel appointment as a Public Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center’s Kennan Institute in Washington, DC. They have now extended into the present year.

During these visits I discussed Russian policy toward the Middle East with a variety of think tank foreign policy and regional experts, journalists with similar experience, some active and some semi-retired diplomats, and several former high-ranking Russian government officials. The conversations took place in May 2010, February and July 2011, February and July 2012, October 2013, February, June, and September 2014, and February and May 2015.

The purpose of these visits to Moscow was initially to continue research on the ongoing evolution of Russian-Iranian developments. My book *Persian Dreams* (Potomac Books, Inc., 2009) took these developments up to 2008.¹ I wanted to take the story further, and my paper *Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program: Replay or Breakthrough?* (NDU Press, 2012) was a first result.²

Soon, however, the Arab Spring broke out. My exchanges in Moscow quickly expanded from Russian-Iranian relations to Moscow’s ties not just with Damascus, but with all the capitals in the Middle East. In 2014, the analytical focus of my trips took another unexpected twist as I began to probe the impact of Russian policy toward Ukraine on Russia’s ties in the Middle East. This paper is an attempt to put it all together.

I am grateful to INSS-NDU; the Wilson Center; U.S. Embassy in Moscow; Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha, Qatar; Track Two Citizen Diplomacy Institute in San Francisco; and Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow for facilitating various aspects of these visits. I am also deeply indebted to my long-time friends and colleagues Robert Otto and Wayne Limberg for bringing many of the articles cited in this paper to my attention and for providing occasional but necessary sanity checks.

I am especially thankful to some 20 Russian colleagues—real professionals—who repeatedly and selflessly shared with me their unvarnished views and critical insights into Russia’s evolving policy toward the Middle East from 2010 into 2015. They are all well known in the field, but they remain anonymous in this paper—except when I cite their many published works. Beginning with my earlier essay on *Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program*, this practice seems to have served well for encouraging informality and the free exchange of ideas, so I have stuck to it here.

The paper incorporates elements from earlier informal presentations and a partial draft-in-progress prepared for the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies conference titled “The Arab World and the U.S.: Interests and Concerns in a Changing Environment (An Academic Perspective),” which was held in Doha, Qatar, on June 14–16, 2014. This paper is based on information that was current as of June 24, 2015.

Slow Fade

Vladimir Putin in time would revive Russian interest in the Middle East after he replaced Boris Yeltsin as president. Yet it was not obvious in 1999–2000 that Russian fortunes in the region would reverse anytime soon. The Middle East per se in the first decade of the 21st century would remain a low priority for Russia in the world.

When then-President Dmitry Medvedev spoke to Russian ambassadors on June 12, 2010, he emphasized Russia's ties to the Asia Pacific region and Europe; Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); Brazil, Russia, India, China (BRIC); European Union (EU); and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); and to Germany, France, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and the United States. But he never mentioned strengthening (or even seeking) ties in the Middle East or Africa.³ Except for Egypt, Russia at this time did not claim to have a “strategic partnership” with any country in the Middle East.⁴ At various times, Moscow teased Tehran with the concept but always stopped well short of realizing it.⁵

In October 2011, Libyan militias backed by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces with Arab League support succeeded in ousting President Muammar Qadhafi from power and brutally murdered him. Russia, especially then–Prime Minister Putin, bitterly criticized the morbid spectacle but could do nothing else. Since then, however, the jagged arc of the Syrian and Arab Spring storylines has carried Russia from a power that was being steadily marginalized in the Middle East to a power whose input is critical to the search for a way forward in the region, and to a way out of the Syrian crisis in particular.⁶

Moreover, while money became one of the prime motivators of Russian ties to the Middle East under Putin, trade was never that high compared to other regions. In 2007, for example, before the global financial crisis knocked everything into a tailspin, Russia's trade with Iran was only \$3.3 billion, not much higher than the \$2.6 billion with Israel. Next came trade with Egypt at \$2.1 billion and Syria at \$1.1 billion. All of these volumes paled in comparison to Russia's trade at the time with Turkey (\$22.6 billion) and China (\$40.3 billion) and even the United States (\$17.8 billion).⁷

From the beginning of the Arab Spring in December 2010 in Tunisia, the Russian reaction was one of deep suspicion toward any expression of Islamic political activism anywhere in the region. When it came to Syria, Russia viewed that country as much more important than Libya, Tunisia, or even Egypt to the security architecture of the region.⁸ In April 2011, not long after Damascus started an operation to repress some of the first peaceful demonstrations against the Bashar al-Assad regime in the city of Deraa, the Russian Foreign Ministry underscored that Syria

was “the cornerstone of the security architecture in the Middle East.”⁹ This became the standard talking point for Russian officials, and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov repeated the formulation in September 2011.¹⁰

Nevertheless, Russia was at first relatively restrained in reacting to the crisis brewing in Syria. As prime minister at the time, Putin, in June 2011 and several times thereafter, claimed that Russia had no special interests in Syria. “Some think for some reasons that we have some special relationship with Syria. A special relationship did exist at one time—in the Soviet era, not now,” Putin demurred. “We have no special interests there—neither military bases, nor major projects, nor billions in investment we would need to defend. Nothing.”¹¹

President Medvedev in August 2011 called on Asad “to urgently carry out reforms, reconcile with the opposition, restore civil peace and create a modern state.” If Asad failed to do this, Medvedev warned, “he is doomed, and we will eventually have to make certain decisions.”¹² Several days later, Riyadh recalled its ambassador from Damascus; Kuwait, Bahrain, and Turkey then did the same.¹³ Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah called on Asad to “halt the machinery of killing before it is too late.”¹⁴ And on August 18, 2011, President Barack Obama proclaimed, “The time has come for President Asad to step aside.”¹⁵

Indeed, in visits to Moscow in February and July 2011, I found the Russian reaction to the upheavals in the Middle East to be passive and bordering on the desultory.¹⁶ Official Moscow appeared to be at most a cautious observer simply reacting to events there, not an engaged actor trying to shape future developments. The prevailing view was that Moscow’s response remained reactive and narrowly focused on trade: politics in the service of economics.

A well-known Russian pundit put it most bluntly: after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had ceased to be a player in the Middle East. Russian policy in the region had become mercantilist and opportunistic. Another observer similarly saw Russia as without any great regional ambitions aside from weapons sales and the like. If something bad happened anywhere, Russia was powerless to do anything. Analysts at one institute, while noting that the region was important for Russian security, observed that Moscow displayed neither initiative nor any signs of a regional plan.¹⁷

This attitude had changed dramatically by February 2012, when I next visited Moscow. The focus was now squarely on Syria, and Russia’s readiness to resist international pressure on Asad verged on the defiant. Russia saw itself as the only adult actor on the world stage compared to the leading Western powers. Syria had become the venue of the hour for Russia to demonstrate

that it was still a great power and for Putin to present himself as a strong leader defending not only Russia's but also other states' sovereignty and independence against foreign interference.

Russian students of the region had a deep appreciation of the core support in Syria for President Asad and of his potential staying power. They also viewed the opposition as fractious, bound increasingly to radicalize, bent on ousting Asad, but having no clear—much less unified—agenda for Syria after that. The Russian perspective was one of amazement that the United States and the West were allowing Saudi Arabia and Qatar to drag them into the conflict, essentially doing their dirty work for them. Russians saw this as a clear case of the tail wagging the dog and a reprise of earlier Saudi tactics against Moscow in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Bosnia. Experts in Moscow forecast chaos not only for Syria but for the entire region should the opposition succeed in ousting Asad.

Still, my contacts in Moscow were largely resigned to Russia's exit from its last foothold in the Middle East—Syria—and to what then seemed as Asad's inevitable downfall. Russia's only hope was that these processes would happen as slowly as possible so as to postpone and perhaps soften the inevitable chaos that would follow.

However, Moscow experts were dismissive of the idea of any major Russian economic or military interests in Syria, including the so-called naval base at Tartus. As one expert put it at the time, Tartus and arms sales, taken together, in comparison to Russia's \$1.85 trillion dollar economy, were peanuts. They were not the real motivation for Russia in Syria.¹⁸ A year and a half later, another still scoffed that Syria presented only miserable economic interests for Russia—just \$200 million in trade in 2012 (down from \$2 billion at its earlier pre-sanctions peak). By comparison, Russia's \$8 billion trade with the entire Middle East was less than half of its \$16 billion trade with Finland.¹⁹

All the same, the Syria crisis injected new fervor into the litany of Russian grievances against the United States and Europe since the Soviet collapse: NATO expansion toward Russian borders; the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia; the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq; purported American support for “color revolutions” in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan; and the NATO-led intervention against the Qadhafi regime in Libya.

Russia insisted that all powers adhere to accepted rules of behavior in international relations, especially noninterference (and particularly military noninterference) into the internal affairs of sovereign nations, and on adherence to the United Nations (UN) Charter and to the primacy of the UN Security Council in authorizing any military interventions anywhere by the international community.

Big Bang

The confluence of four streams of developments in late 2011 sparked the dramatic turnaround in the Russian approach to Syria that was so evident by February 2012 and shaped it along the lines with which we are now familiar.

First, of course, was the Russian reaction, and especially that of Putin, to the Western campaign against Libya and its culmination with the killing of President Muammar Qadhafi on October 20, 2011. Referring to televised video clips of Qadhafi's capture, Putin said the images of Qadhafi "being clubbed to death" were "impossible to see without disgust."²⁰ Putin conceded that Qadhafi's "regime was absolutely deranged and obsolete," but described his "lynching" as "medieval."²¹

In March 2011, in a rare instance of public discord, then–Prime Minister Putin and then–President Medvedev had sparred over the wisdom of abstaining rather than vetoing United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1973 authorizing military action in Libya. Putin called it "a medieval call for a crusade." Medvedev retorted that it was not permissible to use expressions such as "crusades" to criticize the resolution.²² According to some accounts, it was this open clash over the Libya resolution that had subsequently persuaded Putin against Medvedev's reelection as president.²³ If so, it was a harbinger of what would soon become the growing connection between Russian policy in the Middle East and politics at home.²⁴

During my February 2012 visit to Moscow, all of the Russian experts I consulted saw Putin as determined to prevent a repetition of the "Libyan scenario" from unfolding in Syria. By this they meant any attempt by the Western powers to use Security Council authorization for "all necessary measures . . . to protect civilians" to launch a military campaign aimed at regime change in Damascus. Some explained Russia's resounding and enthusiastic second veto of the Syria resolution earlier that month as compensation for Russia's abstention on the Libya resolution the previous year. They said that many establishment insiders regarded that abstention as a major blunder, which they blamed on President Medvedev.²⁵

Several years later, a well-informed Russian foreign policy strategist would reminisce in more nuanced terms that there had indeed been a problem on Libya. Looking back, he suspected that Putin had likely leaned toward vetoing the Libyan resolution but let it pass. This insider remembered well from participating in various discussions that the arguments at the time for abstaining were powerful. The feeling was strong in Moscow that it was necessary not to oppose the UNSC resolution because it was needed to prevent massive bloodshed in Libya.

To go against that would have been a blatant challenge to public opinion. But Russia now knows what followed in Libya, he observed, and the situation in Libya turned out to be a terrible one.²⁶

Russia bitterly objected that the West had gone way beyond the mandate of Resolution 1973 of March 2011. The Western effort to prevent Qadhafi from bombing his opposition into extinction had turned into a campaign that supported the opposition in its efforts to capture Qadhafi and his family. Citing this evolving “Libyan scenario,” Russia cast its first veto of a draft UNSC resolution on Syria on October 4, 2011.²⁷ Two and a half years later, after he annexed Crimea, Putin would assert that the “reset” with the United States had “ended immediately after the events in Libya.”²⁸

The *second* development leading to the Russian turnaround, less well understood, was the political turbulence inside Russia itself. According to independent polling, Putin’s popularity had plummeted. His overall approval had stood at 80 percent in April 2008 but by November 2011 only 31 percent favored him for president.²⁹ Medvedev and Putin’s presumptive revelation in late September that they intended to switch places after the upcoming elections set the stage for a wave of open opposition to Putin’s campaign to regain the presidency.³⁰ The crowd at a boxing match in Moscow in November shockingly booed Putin.³¹ Fraudulent Duma elections provoked large demonstrations on December 10 and December 24, with an estimated 100,000 people turning out in Moscow during the latter one.

Putin needed a new team and new issues to help him recover his political footing, overcome the challenge to his legitimacy, and win the presidential elections scheduled for early March. He named Deputy Prime Minister Sergey Ivanov chief of staff (Head of the Presidential Administration) and Vyacheslav Volodin his (Putin’s) deputy. Volodin also took over running Putin’s presidential campaign. According to one retrospective, “Observers noticed that Volodin’s arrival at the Presidential Administration signaled a completely new attitude in the Kremlin to the leaders of the opposition . . . [and] it was Volodin who came up with the idea of contrasting the poor, loyal provinces with the ‘well-fed’ Moscow opposition.”³² At the same time, Putin brought back long-time Russian nationalist politician Dmitry Rogozin from Brussels, where he had been serving as ambassador to NATO, and made him deputy prime minister in charge of the defense and space industry.

Appealing to its core base outside of Russia’s large cities, Putin’s campaign donned a Russian nationalist/anti-American mantle. The election campaign was marked by increased anti-American sentiment deliberately encouraged by the official media. It portrayed candidate Putin as fighting U.S.-inspired and -directed “orange revolutions” across former Soviet states, now including Russia, as well as a repetition of the “Libyan scenario” in Syria. Early on, Putin

suggested that U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had paid demonstrators to turn out for the massive protests in the Russian capital.³³ Some of this anti-Americanism was even targeted at the new U.S. Ambassador, Michael McFaul, who arrived in Moscow on January 14, 2012, and thereafter had to endure a prolonged campaign of harassment.³⁴

In this electoral context, Syria became the perfect foreign policy issue for Putin to use to pose as a strong leader defending the sovereignty of Great Russia and its reputation as a major power in world politics. And it all worked. Most observers agreed that Putin likely did get a slight majority of the votes in the presidential elections on March 4, 2012. In his victory speech on election night, Putin exuded “Glory to Russia!” and famously shed tears.³⁵ By May 2012, when he was inaugurated, his overall approval rating had recovered to around 60 percent.³⁶

Third, also not well understood and even more poorly remembered, was the sharp increase in October and November 2011 in Israeli and American threats to strike Iranian nuclear enrichment facilities. Moscow feared that this would actually provoke Iran to rush to develop a nuclear weapon rather than slow down its nuclear enrichment program, and that any attack on Iran would soon escalate into regional war and chaos with unforeseen but frightening consequences for Russian interests. This development added to Moscow’s sense of urgency in pursuing the “principle” of nonintervention.³⁷

The same can be said of the *fourth* development. This was the spike in Saudi—as well as Qatari and Turkish—activism against the Asad regime in Syria in late 2011. In October 2011, U.S. charges of an Iranian plot to kill Saudi Ambassador Adel al-Jubeir in Washington made dramatic headlines around the world.³⁸ Reacting to the headlines, prominent Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi predicted that “Syria is the next battleground. [...] Many Saudi Arabians feel there is an extended Iranian hand in Syria, and Syria is not the Iranian domain. They say Syria is our domain, and that a mistake of history put a minority in charge. But it is our territory, and this is our opportunity to correct this mistake of history.” On the same day, Saudi Prince Turki Al Faisal commented, “Somebody in Iran will have to pay the price.”³⁹

According to some accounts, the first armed attacks by the Free Syrian Army occurred just a month after the plot disclosures.⁴⁰ In retrospect, although perhaps pure coincidence, these attacks by the Saudi-supported opposition in Syria may have been Saudi Arabia’s asymmetric response to the Iranian plot. Saudi comments shortly before certainly seemed to point in that direction. In any event, suspicious minds in Moscow could have easily perceived the asserted plot as a pretext for the Saudis to encourage the ramping up of armed resistance in Syria aimed ultimately at undermining Iran.

Official Moscow reacted skeptically to the U.S. claims and did not join its voice with Washington's.⁴¹ However, these tangled events in October and November 2011 appeared to have left the impression in Moscow of a stepped-up and coordinated U.S./Saudi flanking assault on Tehran through Damascus. The controversy reinforced longstanding Russian fears of the impact of Sunni extremism bankrolled by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya. Now it was Syria's turn, and the Saudis and the Americans were simply seeking to leverage the upheavals in that country against Iran.

This seeming revving-up of Saudi and American pressure on Damascus as a way to get at Tehran had the effect of causing Moscow to dig in its heels. Russia stepped up its own efforts against military intervention against either Damascus or Tehran, even as optimism and pessimism about Asad's fate rose and fell in reaction to events in Syria. Russia became more outspoken in accusing Saudi Arabia and Qatar of arming the rebels to topple Asad and in turn weaken Iran. Moscow was reinforced in the view that Sunni rather than Shiite extremism had now become the greater danger to Russia's own security (more on this in the "Saudi-Iranian Seesaw" section).

Still, Moscow held off for a long time before it confronted what it saw as Saudi and Qatari pressure against Asad. Two developments likely pushed Moscow toward finally reacting so strongly. First, the Russian Foreign Ministry charged that Qatari security officials on November 29 had beaten up Russian Ambassador Vladimir Titorenko at the airport in Doha and attempted to seize a diplomatic pouch.⁴² Within days, Russia downgraded diplomatic relations with Qatar. As for the Saudis, all of the evidence suggested that by late 2011 they had abandoned caution and were "all in" in Syria.⁴³

But the last straw likely came at the end of December 2011, when the United States announced that American and Saudi negotiators had signed contracts for \$30 billion of the \$60 billion in weapons purchases approved by Congress in 2010.⁴⁴ Two years earlier, in July 2008, Prince Bandar bin Sultan had met with Putin. Soon thereafter, there had been Moscow press stories that Bandar had dangled visions of \$2–\$6 billion in Saudi weapons purchases from Russia.⁴⁵ Now, however, at the end of December 2011, it became clear to the Russians that there would be no sizable contracts for them from the Saudis.

To this day, bad memories linger in Moscow over Saudi support to opponents of Russian interests in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, and now Syria. The view is widespread in Russia that the Saudis have only tricked and double-crossed Russia over the years and that they are not reliable diplomatic or business partners. Although Putin perhaps did not totally share this

view, he finally had nothing to lose in confronting the Saudis and Qataris in Syria. There was no longer any reason for restraint.

Unexpected Returns

In retrospect, Moscow's opposition in principle, as it argued, to non-UNSC-sanctioned armed intervention in the Syrian conflict had to be considered the main motive for Russia's stand at the time. This was especially so since by July 2012, Asad's position in Damascus and Russia's in Syria appeared so hopeless. The importance in Moscow of this "principle" was a reflection of what most recognized as the impending loss by Russia of its earlier equities in Syria. Already by February 2012, as Foreign Minister Lavrov and Foreign Intelligence Chief Mikhail Fradkov headed off to Damascus, Moscow was abuzz with speculation that the Kremlin was ready to throw Asad under the bus and prepare for his ouster.⁴⁶

That being the case, the impulse seemed to be to draw comfort from the fact that Russia had at least fought an honorable game in reminding the international community of the importance of what Russia interpreted as international law. "If someone conceives the idea of using force at any cost, and I've already heard calls for sending some Arab troops to Syria, we are unlikely to be able to prevent this, if someone wants to do something of the sort," Lavrov conceded in January 2012. "But this should be done on their own initiative and should remain on their conscience. They won't get any authorization from the Security Council," he stated adamantly.⁴⁷

This defense of "principle" increased as Asad's position deteriorated further, reaching perhaps its lowest point in July 2012. In Geneva on June 30, Russia had agreed on the need to move Syria to a transitional government and to accept all parties in it, but it had also insisted on not excluding any (that is, Asad).⁴⁸ However, an analyst in Moscow said shortly afterward that Secretary Clinton had been right when she said that Foreign Minister Lavrov had told her that Russia was prepared to see Asad go, even though this caused a scandal in Moscow.⁴⁹

When Putin delivered the biennial presidential speech to Russian diplomats at the Foreign Ministry in Moscow on July 9, he noted the "contradictory and unbalanced" reform process in the Middle East and North Africa, the "tragic events" in Libya, and his determination not to allow a repeat of the Libya "scenario" in Syria. It was necessary, Putin said, to "do everything possible to press the parties in this conflict into negotiating a peaceful political solution to all issues of dispute." But otherwise, as then-President Medvedev had done in his address in the same forum 2 years earlier, Putin did not suggest that the Middle East ranked as a priority region for Russian interests.⁵⁰

Despite the June 30 agreement in Geneva, violence in Syria surged. It climaxed on July 18 with an explosion in Damascus that killed four of Asad's closest security aides, including his brother-in-law and his defense minister.⁵¹ The next day, Russia and China cast their third veto of a Syrian draft resolution in the UN Security Council. Moscow, however, could have no confidence that its veto would restrain the United States and its partners from striking Syria militarily, or that Asad could withstand the rising pressure from the armed opposition.

In Moscow, many observers recognized that Asad's position was deteriorating and feared that he was unlikely to survive. Nevertheless, argued one Russian commentator, Syria was just one of the many issues on Russia's geopolitical agenda. From Moscow's global perspective, it did not matter whether Russia won or lost in Syria. As a veteran former high-ranking diplomat put it, Russia's policy in Syria was to maintain international law, not to maintain Asad.⁵²

But then, Russian hopes began to rise. After the September 11, 2012, murder of American Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens in Benghazi, Libya, some in Moscow pointed to the tragedy almost gleefully. They took it as confirmation that Russia was pursuing the correct policy in the Middle East while the United States had blundered.⁵³

Nine months later, the victory of Asad forces in Qusayr on June 5, 2013, produced a more substantial confidence bump. Moscow viewed it as confirmation of the staying power of the Damascus regime, supported critically by Lebanese Hizballah fighters, Iranian advisors and financial support, and Russian military supplies and diplomatic blocking. As such, it was also seen as a token of success for Putin's independent, anti-Western policy on Syria, and thus also of the importance of Russia in the region.⁵⁴

The Russian reaction to Qusayr was a reminder that Russian aims and motivations in Syria were dynamic and not static. They were deflated by setbacks on the ground in Syria—both Asad's absurdly brutal handling of the opposition and the opposition's successful strikes against the regime, such as the bomb that killed four insiders in July 2012—and inflated by Damascus regime successes such as that at Qusayr. When on a roll, such as after Qusayr, Putin likely calculated that advances in Syria raised his and Russia's stature in the world as a great power and a key actor in dealing with the Middle East, especially the Syria problem. But at home, polling suggested that support for Putin was not rising commensurately and that his "negatives" were actually increasing (more on this in the "Third, The Domestic Politics Dimension" subsection of the "After Syria—On to Crimea" section).

Given the action-reaction dynamic between supporters of the Damascus regime and its opponents, the inflated moments were hard to sustain. Although the smoke-and-mirror advances for Russian diplomacy at times appeared to have morphed into something more solid,

realistically any gains could easily collapse with the defeat of the Damascus regime. Veteran Middle East analyst Georgiy Mirskiy opined that despite the Qusayr victory, Asad was a strategic loser and the Syrian civil war would continue until both sides ran out of blood.⁵⁵ Similar views certainly fed the argument in Moscow that a political solution, however imperfect, would still be the best solution for Russia's long-term interests in the region, given Asad's still-not-good odds of surviving long term as a viable ruler.

However, the Qusayr victory—as well as the questions and uncertainties raised by Hassan Rouhani's surprise victory in Iran's presidential elections on June 14, 2013—appeared instead to spur Russia to stay in the Syrian game on the military front and spread its bets more robustly. Soon there were indications that Russian arms transfers to Syria had increased.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian-Syrian arms contracts had been fairly inconsequential until Russia forgave 70 percent of Syria's debt of \$13.4 billion in January 2005, when Bashar al-Assad first visited Moscow as president. By early 2007, Russia and Syria had concluded a \$4.5 billion package of major contracts. By summer 2012, the total volume of contracts stood at \$5.5 billion.⁵⁶

Syria was thus Russia's largest arms buyer in the Middle East. However, Russia had strung out actual deliveries of the arms for political reasons, and they amounted to only around \$1 billion by mid-2012. Under American and Israeli pressure, complained one Moscow expert on arms transfers, Russia had actually not gone through with at least three big contracts—Iskander-E missile systems, S-300PMU-2 air defense systems, and Igla surface-to-air missile (SAM) man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS)—and had gotten little recognition from the West for its restraint.⁵⁷

An expert on arms transfers stated in mid-2012 that Russian spokesmen could say “no more contracts” because Asad did not have the money to sign them. He doubted that Russia was selling small arms and light weapons to Syria because Russian sellers were not interested in the low profit margins from small weapons on small platforms; there was little money in it. Furthermore, the contracts for the small arms were all 10 years old. In addition, the arms that Syrian regime forces did not have could be obtained from Iran more quickly and less expensively than via Russia, which was both longer and considerably more expensive.⁵⁸

At the same time, Syria may have been acquiring some valuable “passive” Russian military technology either directly from Russia or indirectly through Iran. Among these systems was the Avtobaza electronic surveillance system. Damascus reportedly was using this mobile intercept system with lethal efficiency to pinpoint the coordinates of satellite phones that Qatar and Western intelligence agencies had provided to Syrian opposition fighters.⁵⁹

By mid-2013, however, Russian readiness to openly transfer greater volumes and more sophisticated arms to Syria was changing rapidly. The fuse had been set months earlier. In February 2013, rebel forces for the first time began receiving M-79 anti-tank weapons and M-60 recoilless rifles from unspecified outside sources.⁶⁰ Separately, in August 2012 President Obama had stated that the use of chemical weapons would constitute a “red line” that, if crossed by the Asad regime, would cause the United States to provide lethal weapons to the Syrian opposition.⁶¹ An incident on March 19, 2013, sparked charges and countercharges of chemical weapons use in Syria.

Subsequently, on May 31, 2013, the EU embargo on weapons supplies to the Syrian opposition lapsed.⁶² On June 13, the White House announced that the United States had concluded that the Asad regime had used chemical weapons “multiple times in the last year,” including in mid-March 2013. President Obama had therefore authorized the supply by the United States of lethal weapons—light arms and ammunition—to the Syrian opposition.⁶³

The U.S. decision injected uncertainty into Russian calculations as to the likely outcome of the civil war in Syria and the returns that it might reap for all that it had invested diplomatically. Yes, Russia—according to Putin—had no material interests in Syria. Yet after 2 years of shielding Syria from UNSC action, Russia had immense reputational interests that it was not willing to give up easily.

Moreover, Russia was gaining confidence that the Asad regime might outlast rebel forces, even if thrown back into its Latakia stronghold. Russia seemed well on its way to being able to claim that it had prevailed over the American—and Saudi, Qatari, Turkish, and others’—desire to intervene in Syria and change the regime in Damascus.⁶⁴

In reaction, and even perhaps anticipating the EU and U.S. decisions, Moscow by late spring 2013 appeared to have taken the decision to supply Asad forces more robustly with spare parts, ammunition, and small arms.⁶⁵ Commenting on the end of the EU embargo, Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu warned, “Any decision has two sides. If one side lifts some restrictions, the other side may consider itself not bound to honor commitments it undertook earlier.”⁶⁶

Several weeks later, after the U.S. decision, an opinion piece in the Russian government daily newspaper argued that Syria was “the culmination of the lawlessness imposed by the Americans.” In preparing to deliver arms directly to the Syrian opposition, it charged, the United States was crossing a Russian “red line” that had helped limit the scale of the Syrian conflict. Russia had restricted itself until then to fulfilling old weapons contracts with Syria and refrained from signing new ones. “But the U.S. plans to bypass the UN Security Council, deliver weapons to the militants, and impose a no-fly zone in southern Syria untie our hands.”⁶⁷

Small arms are almost impossible to track if deliberately concealed. But by late summer 2013, circumstantial evidence suggested that Russia had abandoned its earlier self-described restraint and that there had been a definite uptick in Russian arms transfers to Syria since April 2013.⁶⁸

A Russian source familiar with “military-technological contracts” asserted that Russia had started to supply Syria with more than small arms. These new armaments included “new-generation” Buk-M2E and Pantsir-S1 air defense systems and Bastion mobile coastal systems armed with supersonic Yakhont anti-ship guided missiles capable of hitting targets at ranges of up to 300 kilometers. The presence of these systems in Syria, he suggested, “should cool some hotheads. What was done to Libya won’t work this time around.”⁶⁹

Other experts recalled that Russia in the past had put on hold some big weapons deliveries to Syria. But then, they speculated, with Saudi Arabia and Qatar arranging for the delivery of weapons to Syrian opposition forces through third parties, Russia understood that there was to be no fair play. Therefore, after the British had intervened the previous year to revoke insurance coverage for the merchant marine ship *MV Alaed*, thus preventing it from delivering air defense systems and repaired helicopters to Syria, Russia had begun using its navy landing ships to transport weapons to Syria. They could not be stopped by anyone without a declaration of war.⁷⁰

Through these shuttle naval visits, Russia had reinforced its delivery of small weapons and spare parts—small items whose transfer could not be detected—that the Asad regime needed to fight on a daily basis. Most of it was from military reserves and had no impact on Russian industry, making it essentially invisible. The Asad regime could go only so far in cannibalizing broken-down weapons systems to repair functioning ones; however, Russia had stepped in to supply the necessary spares.

Under existing contracts, the supply of spares was legal. Russia was fulfilling existing contracts that included follow-up maintenance, upgrades, and repairs of Russian weapons systems sold to Syria, such as helicopters and combat aircraft. Technically, there were no “new” contracts.⁷¹

Judging by the frequency of Russian navy landing ships going to Syria, these experts speculated that there was a steady flow of such basic supplies, including ammunition and infantry weapons. They referred to this constant ship traffic as the “Syrian Express.” The Russian Black Sea fleet had around seven large landing ships, LST *Tapir* class, each making around 10 trips to Syria each year. The ships, rather old and displacing only around 4,000 tons, were loaded in Novorossyisk and then sailed from Crimea to the port of Latakia in Syria.⁷²

At the same time, on June 17, 2013, Putin and Obama at the G-8 summit in Lough Erne, Northern Ireland, discussed Syria, including how to prevent the use of chemical weapons

there.⁷³ In Moscow's view, Putin had held his own and successfully resisted efforts to call for Asad's resignation and a transitional government, watering the language down to a transitional "body."⁷⁴ Russia seemed to have gone from its gamble—for the sake of "principle"—on a likely loser a year earlier to a winning diplomacy. This was getting Putin grudging respect on the international stage as well as at home—even from those who otherwise were uncomfortable with his leadership.

On August 6, however, reacting in part to Russia's decision to give asylum to National Security Agency leaker Edward Snowden, President Obama decided not to attend the bilateral summit with Putin already planned to take place in Moscow in early September, and on the eve of the G-20 summit in St. Petersburg. Then, in his August 9 press conference, Obama suggested that a "pause" in U.S.-Russia relations was in order. That threatened Putin with prolonged diplomatic isolation from one-on-one interactions with his primary great power counterpart.⁷⁵

Moreover, the United States put Asad's tenure in danger later that month when Obama decided to retaliate with a military strike after concluding that Syrian regime forces had used chemical weapons to kill nearly 1,500 civilians in the Damascus suburb of Adra on August 21.⁷⁶ However, when President Obama decided at the last minute to get congressional backing for the move, and then on September 9 quickly agreed to Putin's proposal for destroying the Asad regime's chemical weapon stocks and production capabilities, Asad gained a respite.

In addition to helping save the Asad regime from the impending U.S. strike, Russia's diplomacy foreshortened what looked likely to be a long pause in U.S.-Russian summits. It also diverted an American military strike that could have exposed weaknesses in Syria's Russian-origin air defenses. That Syria has great air defenses is a big myth, opined one Russian specialist. They are better than were Libya's, but are vulnerable to attack by U.S. Tomahawk cruise missiles, he claimed. According to this well-known expert, the United States has access to all Russian air defense systems exported abroad except for the S-400, and the Israelis have kept a meticulous inventory of Syrian targets.⁷⁷

In February 2012, Putin had lamented what he called the U.S. and Western "itch for military intervention" in Syria. He had warned against the "temptation to resort to this simple, previously used tactic: if the UN Security Council approves of a given action, fine; if not, we will establish a coalition of the states concerned and strike anyway."⁷⁸ At the time, though, he did not appear confident that his warning would be heeded.

By December 18, 2013, however, Putin sounded as though he had accomplished his mission in the Middle East. "The situation surrounding Syria, and now surrounding Iran as well,

has shown that any international problem can and should be resolved exclusively through political means, without resorting to forceful actions that have no prospect and are rejected by the majority of the world's countries.”⁷⁹

Independent observers in Moscow, however, were quick to qualify the success of Putin’s policy in Syria and the Middle East. In February 2014, on the eve of the Sochi Winter Olympics, a well-known student of the Middle East agreed that Russia was now in a better position in the region than it had been 3 years earlier.⁸⁰ It had not lost everything on the economic front as was first feared. There had been losses, of course, but they should not be exaggerated. In Iraq, for example, Lukoil had stayed the course and its investments in the West Qurna 2 field would soon start turning a profit. There were also prospects for weapons sales to Iraq and Egypt, among others.

Overall, though, the Middle East was mainly of instrumental value to Russia, cautioned this observer. It was a region where Moscow could demonstrate that others had to take its interests into account. This was more important to Russia than any increased trade and weapons sales. In addition, the impulse to fight Islamization and the spread of terrorism—a domestic security factor of utmost importance to Moscow—was a high priority. Moscow needed to persuade the Arabs not to treat Russia as an enemy against which to target terrorist activity.⁸¹

Another well-known Russian observer of broad foreign policy trends captured different dimensions of the prevailing mood.⁸² He cautioned that there was a tendency among some in Moscow to attribute Russian successes in the Middle East to good analysis of the situation by Russian area experts. In actuality, this commentator asserted, it had all been an accident resulting from the total failures of all the other powers involved in the region. American policy had proved incomprehensible. European policy had been bankrupt. But Russia had stuck to one position. On Syria, Russian policy did not change at all.

Two years earlier, Russians like this observer had thought that Russian policy on Syria was doomed and therefore foolish. It seemed bound to undermine all of Russia’s prospects in post-Asad Syria, he recalled self-critically. But since then, the Russian line had emerged as something more or less viable. The consistency of Putin’s approach to the Syrian conflict and Moscow’s unexpected success in holding its own against Washington had led to growing respect, even from leaders of countries like Saudi Arabia, which was not otherwise favorably disposed toward Russia. They now believed that Russia needed to be dealt with, even if this strained relations with Washington. As a result, some regional capitals had begun to consult more closely with Russia, to lobby for its support, and to return to the Russian arms market, while others had resumed high-level exploratory contacts.

But all of this had been unexpected, this commentator emphasized, and surprised even those who managed Russian policy. At the same time, many outside Russia were now erroneously expecting Russia to come back to the Middle East and reestablish the positions gained by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. There was no way this would happen, he underscored. Russia did not have a clue how to capitalize on the situation that had developed in the Middle East. On Asad, there was no inkling that Putin had a Plan B, and his Plan A remained doing everything he could to make sure Asad won reelection in 2014.

Well, then, was the Middle East a priority for Russia? Not a real priority, this observer argued. The Middle East had become a priority of sorts because it turned out to be a highly successful part of Russian diplomacy. Russia indeed had good diplomats working the region, had benefited from an improved reputation, and stood ready to sell weapons to any country that wanted them. But that was about it, he emphasized.⁸³

Saudi-Iranian Seesaw

Relations between Russia and Iran have waxed and waned since the Islamic revolution of 1979. Engagement has historically been Moscow's default setting for dealing with Tehran. Before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the two countries had partnered closely in resisting Taliban threats to their regional equities in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Since 2002, however, revelations of Iran's secret nuclear enrichment program had begun to feed growing mistrust of Iran's motives, crowned by Moscow's abrogation in September 2010 of the contract to transfer S-300 air defense systems to Iran.⁸⁴

Unease Over Iran's Rise

In the decade preceding the advent of the Arab Spring, Iran's rise in the region increasingly concerned Moscow.⁸⁵ Middle East professionals such as former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov lamented the consequences of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁸⁶ This had destroyed the Iran-Iraq balance of power that had brought a modicum of stability to the region since the end of the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq war. The collapse of Iraqi power, the revelation of Iran's nuclear program in 2002–2003, and the success of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah forces in stymieing the Israeli army in the 2006 Lebanese war had all contributed to concern in Moscow over Iran's seemingly relentless rise in the region. There was also some worry over possible future revanchist intentions on the part of Iran toward territory lost to Russia in the imperial wars of the 19th century.⁸⁷

During Putin's first term, Russia again began to treat Syria as an important player in the Middle East. This was perhaps partly in reaction to American exploration of rapprochement with Damascus. But Putin's attempts to reengage with Syria during his first term as president could perhaps be best understood in the context of the times as having several goals. One was an effort to improve Russia's position in the Middle East by capitalizing on the negative reaction in the region to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Another was to wean Asad away from this rising and more threatening Iran. Moscow may also have seen a greater presence in Syria as a backdoor balance to Iranian leverage in Iraq and Lebanon, not just in Syria itself.

In any event, the Russians certainly had reasons to let the Syrians know they had other choices besides Iran and the United States. Bashar al-Asad, however, who succeeded his deceased father Hafez in July 2000, did not appear much interested in boosting ties with Moscow until he needed Russian help in 2011. Putin would later recount that "when Asad took over as president, he first went to France, Britain and other countries. He visited Moscow [only] after three years of presidency."⁸⁸

Reaching Out to Riyadh

For some of the same reasons that Putin sought to resuscitate relations with Syria, he also sought during this period to exploit Saudi unhappiness with the United States over Iraq, as well as Riyadh's reciprocal concern over Iran. Russian writings remind us that Saudi Arabia, prior to 2003, had put all its eggs in the U.S. basket. But after the United States sparked much concern across the Muslim world by invading Iraq, Saudi Arabia wanted to diversify its ties and began to put some distance between itself and the United States.⁸⁹

For Russia, Saudi Arabia, a country important both in the Muslim world and in the Persian Gulf, represented potential business opportunities as well as a longstanding rival of Iran in the region. In addition, Saudi Arabia had a great deal more money than Iran, which made it potentially a much more interesting market for Russian weapons and other goods. More recently, Riyadh had been active in opposing the transfers of S-300s to Iran.⁹⁰

However, there was a significant downside for Russia in dealing with Saudi Arabia. Iran had behaved generally well toward Russian interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus since Tehran's misadventure supporting the losing side in the Tajik civil war that immediately followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.⁹¹ In contrast, Saudi behavior had been less restrained in opposing Russian interests. Analysts in Moscow pointed out that Saudi Arabia had invested much in defeating the Soviet army in Afghanistan in the 1980s, that Saudi donors had

given generously to the Chechen independence movement in the post-Soviet 1990s, and that Riyadh had also helped bankroll Muslim forces in Bosnia during the breakup of Yugoslavia.⁹²

Not surprisingly, Moscow's overtures to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies did not develop much traction well into the post-Soviet period.⁹³ That began to change after 2003, however. Deepening fears of Iran in the region were sparked by the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the political emergence of Iraq's Shia majority, and the series of revelations about Iran's 18-year-long secret nuclear program. All of these factors, as well as the impulse to demonstrate displeasure toward the United States for toppling Iraq's Sunni minority leader Hussein, led to a warmer welcome for Russia from Iran's Sunni Gulf neighbors. They all had an interest in constraining Shia Iran, in part by dangling incentives for Russia to distance itself from the Islamic republic.

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, then the Crown Prince, broke the ice with a visit to Moscow in September 2003. Russia, which had for many years been pursuing ties with all sides in the Middle East, was of course ready to entertain Saudi overtures. During Abdullah's visit, the two countries tried to put the Chechen issue behind them. Moscow for several years had complained that Saudi Arabia was supporting Chechen rebels in Russia's North Caucasus.⁹⁴ Now, however, Abdullah expressed his "conviction" that the "Chechen question" was "Russia's internal affair."⁹⁵ Saudi Arabia also looked favorably on Russia's bid to be embraced by the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which 2 years later would give Russia permanent observer status.⁹⁶

Events in 2006 put nerves further on edge throughout the region. The July–August war in Lebanon, in which Iran backed Hizballah forces that succeeded in stalemating the Israeli army, marked a high-water mark for Iran's influence in the Middle East. Iran that year also defied the UN Security Council—including Russia, of course—by resuming and expanding nuclear enrichment and reprocessing after a "voluntary" 2-year suspension. At the same time, Iran contributed to the tsunami of sectarian violence that broke out in Iraq. All of this sparked a resurgence of fear in the region of an American or Israeli strike on Iran.⁹⁷

By 2007, the Gulf monarchies seemed to be worried as much by Iran's nuclear ambitions and muscle flexing as they were by the possibility that the United States or Israel might try to solve the problem militarily. At the same time, Russia had already endorsed referral of the Iranian nuclear file to the UN Security Council in 2006, and had begun to support a series of resolutions calling on Iran to suspend its nuclear enrichment program while creating UNSC procedural barriers to using military force against Iran.⁹⁸ The members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) seemed to see in Russia an independent actor with the potential to restrain both Washington and Tehran.

Thus, Russia's relations with the Arab Gulf powers continued to improve during Putin's second term as president. He broke new ground when he visited Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan in February 2007, the first-ever Russian or Soviet leader to visit the Persian Gulf, where he pitched Russian arms, oil investments, nuclear reactors, and satellite launches.⁹⁹

Disenchantment with Saudis

Meanwhile, the United States remained central to the security of the Saudis and the GCC.¹⁰⁰ The Saudis did not look to Russia in a military way, but did seemingly try to entice Russian co-operation toward their own regional security goals with the lure of substantial arms contracts. During the visit of Saudi National Security Council head Prince Bandar bin Sultan to Moscow in July 2008, as we have seen, Russia and Saudi Arabia signed a military-cooperation agreement that reportedly could result in "several large arms contracts."¹⁰¹ Subsequent negotiations on deals reportedly worth \$2–\$6 billion seemed designed to sweeten the pot for a decision by Moscow to downplay relations with Iran.¹⁰²

During Medvedev's presidency, as Russian-Iranian relations actually cooled, the Saudis did not appear eager to conclude these contracts quickly. Perhaps they wanted to make sure that Russia's decision to dampen relations with Iran stayed in place. The Saudis also may have been reluctant to pay a big price for a decision that they may have perceived Moscow was increasingly ready to make for its own reasons, motivated more by its fluctuating ties with the United States and by Iranian behavior than by Saudi blandishments. The Saudis also may have been simply playing with Russia while they negotiated a truly significant arms deal with the United States, estimated at \$60 billion.¹⁰³

Subsequent reports mentioned only "several" Russian-Saudi weapons contracts in 2010, not the larger ones expected earlier, as well as possible Saudi investment in Russian infrastructure for the 2018 soccer World Cup.¹⁰⁴ Little of this panned out, as discussed earlier in the "Big Bang" section of this paper. Russian disappointment likely contributed to Putin's increasingly hard line on Syria, which pushed back against the desire of Saudi Arabia—and many other nations—to oust Asad from power in Damascus.

Appreciation of Iranian "Natural Barrier"

All in all, in assessing ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia in May 2010, there was not much confidence in Moscow that Saudi Arabia was a viable counterweight to Iran. One observer speculated that Saudi Arabia may have been trying to make up for Iraq's loss as a counterweight to Iran. Others conceded that there might be an element of this in Russia's view of Saudi Arabia and vice

versa. However, several experts cautioned that Saudi Arabia was too weak a reed to support such hopes. Iranian power was simply too overwhelming and the prospects for instability down the road in Saudi Arabia were too high. A well-known expert concluded that Russia therefore looked to its interests with Iran and Saudi Arabia along separate tracks, and not as counterweights to each other.

The view that it was in Russia's interests to keep patiently engaged with Tehran however far Iran went down the military nuclear path was widespread. In 10 years, it was likely to become the regional power of the first rank in the Middle East and Persian Gulf, so Russia could not afford to ignore or anger it.

Russia was willing to put some pressure on Iran, said close observers of the relationship, but not enough to turn it into an enemy and a big problem to deal with in the future. No one believed that Iran would attack Russian territory with a nuclear weapon. Most analysts, including Russian Foreign Ministry officials, believed that good relations with this country with a population already over 70 million were critical for stability in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Russia did not want any Iranian-inspired unrest to the north.¹⁰⁵

In July 2011, expert observers in Moscow were still more concerned about a rising Iran benefiting from the Arab Spring than about Sunni jihadists upsetting the regional order by trying to topple the Asad regime in Syria. However, after the Saudis and the Qatars switched from trying to mollify Asad to trying to oust him in late 2011, all of Russia's historical concerns over Saudi terrorism returned. At the same time, Moscow reverted to its earlier regard, now strengthened, for Iran as a "natural barrier" against Saudi-encouraged Sunni extremism rising out of the Middle East to threaten Russian interests to the north—Moscow's take on Saudi policy in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Bosnia. This barrier would be eroded by a successful Saudi and Qatari campaign against Iran through Syria.¹⁰⁶

In 2006, for example, Yevgeniy Satanovskiy, president of the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, alluded to sentiment in Iran for rolling back the results of the 19th-century treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmanchai (1828), imposed on a humbled Iran by the victorious Russian Empire. Satanovskiy speculated that after settling matters with its Persian Gulf rivals, Iran would turn its sights to its former "northern territories" in the Caucasus and Central Asia.¹⁰⁷

By May 2012, however, the historian Stanislav Khatuntsev argued that Shia Iran was actually a shield that Russia should do everything to preserve—including by restarting the transfer of embargoed air defense systems—against the onslaught of Sunni extremism, which he charged was supported by the West. "This Shiite state is a kind of shield protecting Russia's Caucasus and Central Asian regions from the onslaught of militant Islamism of a Salafi-Wahhabi bent."¹⁰⁸

Strategic Partners?

Since then, Russia and Iran have had some parallel interests in Syria, although they have pursued different policies. And while Russian and Iranian interests coexisted and to some extent overlapped, the leverage each had sought through Syria was aimed at divergent goals in the region.

As one analyst put it, Iranian and Russian aims in Syria were not the same. For Iran, Syria was a bridge to Hezbollah and the Palestinians for destabilizing the rest of the Middle East. For Russia, Syria was a window through which to stabilize the Middle East so that Russia could do business. If the Middle East were stable, Iran would have no influence.¹⁰⁹

Moscow at the beginning of the Syrian crisis was less tied to Asad staying in power than was Tehran. Russia had regional national security interests of its own in Syria, but they were not of the first order as they were for Iran. In a sense, though, Putin in Syria may have been trying to use Iran's existential national security need to keep Asad in power to support Russia's global pretensions to be a great power that could act independently of—and compete on the world stage with—the United States.

Russia has never formally agreed to a "strategic partnership" with Iran. Moreover, the 2001 Russia-Iran Treaty signed by then-presidents Mohammad Khatami and Vladimir Putin in Moscow does not commit either side to render military aid to the other in case of aggression by a third party, but merely "not to give any help to the aggressor" and to assist a settlement on the basis of the UN Charter and international law.¹¹⁰

With Putin's late 2011 to early 2012 commitment to the Damascus regime, however, the diverse and simultaneous threats directed at Iran and Syria pushed Moscow and Tehran closer together. There were unusual signs that Moscow would not join efforts to isolate Iran. In November, a representative of Russia's Security Council worked the text of a vague strategic cooperation agreement with his counterpart from Iran's Supreme National Security Council.¹¹¹ Although the final document was not signed until October 2014, the Russian and Iranian security councils in the meantime in fact did meet more often, one of several strands of ostentatiously closer consultations between Moscow and Tehran during this period.¹¹²

Thus, one of the unintended consequences of the increased direct pressure on Iran and of the indirect pressure on Iran through Syria was the drawing closer together of Moscow and Tehran. As a result of Russia's obsession with suspected Saudi-sponsored Sunni terrorism and the dynamics of the Syrian crisis, Russia drifted toward an implicit soft alliance with Shia Iran, Syria, and Iraq. In return, one informed perception in Moscow was that Iran increasingly appreciated

Russian policy on Syria and had become more respectful of Moscow and less prone to regard it as always maneuvering around Iranian interests and toying with Tehran.¹¹³

Not Just the Money

Yet Tehran could never rest easy as it viewed Russia's continuing contacts with regional rival Riyadh. Ever since the Syrian conflict had escalated into a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, there had been a quiet debate in Moscow over policy in the Middle East: should Russia rely on what it widely viewed as the arc of Shiite stability and Iran's "natural barrier" to Sunni extremism, or should it try to repair relations with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Sunni monarchies and, if so, how much effort should be expended?

Russia wanted productive contacts and profitable contracts with all countries in the region, but Moscow had not liked what it viewed as aggressive Saudi efforts to influence politics in Libya, Egypt, and Syria. Nevertheless, for Putin it was not just the money, Russian analysts stressed. There was also the issue of terrorism, which long predated the onset of the Arab Spring. There was an obsession with the belief that Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Gulf states continued to provide money to militant Salafist and Wahhabi cells in Sunni Muslim districts of the Russian Federation's North Caucasus and central Volga territories. Trade and profits were fine, in Moscow's view, but not when they sponsor terrorists who were killing even moderate Islamic clergy in Russia. The Russian leadership and public were equally jaundiced on this point.¹¹⁴

All the same, neither side let ties lapse. Though disputes over Syria divided Moscow and Riyadh, the keep-in-touch line seemed to have the upper hand in both capitals. Prince Bandar visited Putin in Moscow at the end of July and then again in early December 2013.¹¹⁵ In between, there was a Lavrov-Bandar phone call in August and a Putin-King Abdullah phone conversation in November.¹¹⁶

Bandar's meetings with Putin provoked much speculation. Many even in Moscow were puzzled about their content but convinced that Bandar had overreached in his transactional threats to security at the upcoming Sochi Winter Olympics.¹¹⁷ As officially described, however, beyond bilateral ties, the exchanges dealt with key Middle East and North Africa issues, including Egypt, Syria, and the Iranian nuclear file. This did not stop considerable speculation in the press that Riyadh had offered Moscow \$15 billion in arms contracts and a guarantee of no terrorist attacks to spoil the Sochi Winter Olympics in exchange for the dropping of Russian support for Asad.¹¹⁸

As in previous contacts in the 2003–2008 period, the linked issues of Saudi-sponsored anti-Russian activity in the North Caucasus and Saudi arms contracts seemed in play. Given the personal prestige that Putin had invested in the Sochi Olympics, it would not be unreasonable to

assume that due diligence on behalf of security for the games prompted him to touch base with Riyadh during the last half of 2013.¹¹⁹ According to one press story, his meetings with Bandar led to Riyadh agreeing to set up an intelligence office in Moscow to help Russia track extremist Chechens.¹²⁰ In any event, the Games took place under completely unanticipated conditions of local peace and quiet. This calm was disrupted not by a terrorist assault on the Games but by sudden political turbulence in Ukraine.

After Syria—On to Crimea

On February 24, 2014, the large landing ship *Nikolay Fil'chenkov*, rather than making a run from Novorossyisk to the Syrian port of Latakia, was reported to be carrying 200 soldiers and 10 BTR-80 armored personnel carriers (APCs) from the Russian Black Sea port of Temryuk to Sevastopol. (The *Nikolay Fil'chenkov* was one of the Russian Navy ships active in the “Syrian Express,” and photographs of it could easily be found on the Internet.) Its destination and cargo were early tip-offs of what would turn out to be the Russian invasion of Crimea and a stark example of how Russia’s experience in Syria helped set the table for its annexation of Crimea.¹²¹

The annexation of Crimea was not part of a master plan of which war with Georgia in 2008 had been a major component. After that conflict, Putin insisted to a German television interviewer that Russia recognized all of Ukraine’s borders and that Crimea was not disputed territory.¹²² Psychologically, however, Putin certainly nursed deep antipathies toward the Ukrainian political establishment ever since the Orange Revolution in 2004 frustrated Russian efforts to put a more Moscow-friendly government in power in Kyiv. In fact, Putin asserted to President George W. Bush, after the latter in April 2008 championed bringing Ukraine into NATO, that “Ukraine is not even a state. [...] Part of its territories is Eastern Europe, but the greater part is a gift from us.”¹²³ So Putin may well have long been prepared emotionally to strike back at Kyiv by dismembering Ukraine.

In the end, however, the Crimean action was a risky, last-minute improvisation that shocked many close observers in Moscow, to say nothing of the rest of the world.¹²⁴ It violated the Budapest Memorandum of 1994. Signed by the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, and the United States and the prime minister of Britain, it pledged to “respect the Independence and Sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine” and to “refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine.”¹²⁵ Putin would later claim that Crimea had been a “strategic decision,” but it would bring with it major unintended, unforeseen, and uncalculated consequences.¹²⁶

A year later, Putin would describe an all-night meeting that took place February 22–23, 2014. “We finished at about seven o’clock in the morning. As we parted, I will not hide it, I told all my colleagues, there were four of them: The situation has unfolded in Ukraine in such a way that we have to start work on the return of Crimea to being part of Russia.”¹²⁷ The four colleagues Putin addressed—whom he described as “the heads of our special services and the Ministry of Defense”—were certainly Defense Minister Shoygu and very likely Presidential Administration chief Sergey Ivanov, Russian Security Council secretary Nikolay Patrushev, and Federal Security Service (FSB) director Aleksandr Bortnikov.¹²⁸ The timing of the meeting accords with the sighting of the *Nikolay Filchenkov* on February 24 headed for Sevastopol with its cargo of troops and armored personnel carriers. The limited attendance at the critical session reminded some of the decisionmaking under Brezhnev to invade Afghanistan.¹²⁹ Economics did not seem to play any role in the early Crimea decision (see Appendix A: Crimea—Damn the Cost).

That Foreign Minister Lavrov may not have been there reinforced the impression that on Ukraine his ministry has been the implementer and not the decider of Russian policy toward Ukraine.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, a tough Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement on February 24 suggested that Lavrov was certainly in the loop.¹³¹ Put out the day after the Sochi Olympics closed, it stated that everything that was happening in Kyiv was illegal and contravened the February 21 power-sharing agreement between President Viktor Yanukovich and the opposition. As such, it in essence laid the groundwork for justifying an eventual Russian intervention.

In Putin’s recounting of the February 22–23 all-night session, he “set them the task, let’s be upfront about it, to save the life of the president of Ukraine.” He then described in dramatic detail the efforts dedicated to extricating Yanukovich safely from Ukraine. According to Putin, Kyiv was intent on killing Yanukovich.¹³² It is easy to read into Putin’s words a clear emotional arc from his earlier outraged dismay at how Qadhafi was killed in Libya in October 2011 and the possibility of a similar fate befalling Yanukovich in Ukraine.

In addition to the specter of Qadhafi’s murder, there were several Syrian dimensions to Putin’s decision to go into Crimea, and later there would be several wider Middle East dimensions to the way the Russian president would deal with the international blowback to his Ukrainian moves. For now, the momentum of Putin’s success in reestablishing Russia as a major player in Syria and by extension in the Middle East had psychologically set the stage for carrying him on to Crimea.¹³³ Security dimensions were also strong motivating factors in both theaters: in Syria, it was the threat of radical Islam moving north to Russia out of the Middle East; in Ukraine, it was the desire to keep NATO from moving farther eastward.

Mixed in with security motives were also Putin's domestic political needs: both in Syria and then in Crimea he used opposition to American policy to bolster the image of Russia as a restored great power and not coincidentally to buck up his approval ratings among the Russian public. Finally, there would be a similarity in Russian military ways and means to dealing with both theaters: Putin had successfully used the Syrian Express to covertly transfer military hardware and supplies to the beleaguered Asad regime; in Crimea and then southeastern Ukraine, Russia would employ similar war methods not just to supply military material to local pro-Russian fighters, but even to insert Russian soldiers.

First: The Momentum Factor

As with Syria, Crimean decisionmaking was all Putin's, and as 2013 turned into 2014 the Russian president was on a powerful roll. Syrian regime successes on the battlefield had boosted Russian confidence on the world stage and in the Middle East. At the end of October 2013, *Forbes* magazine had proclaimed Putin the most powerful person in the world, ahead of President Obama, who dropped to second place.¹³⁴

In December 2013, Putin's offer of \$15 billion in loans and discounted gas turned Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich away from NATO and EU membership and toward joining Moscow's Eurasian Economic Union.¹³⁵ Despite its vulnerability to terrorist attacks and noncooperative weather, the Sochi Winter Olympics in February 2014 went off well, sparking a wave of national pride and support for the Russian president. Perhaps Putin's two meetings with Saudi Prince Bandar the previous year had played a role in discouraging any potential terrorist attacks.

In October 2013, a hard-boiled and well-known Russian strategic thinker in frequent contact with Russian policymakers had privately conceded that it was true that Putin lived in a semi-monarchical bubble. Nevertheless, he asserted, there was now no world leader equal to Putin intellectually on the world stage.¹³⁶

Without being pushed to elaborate, Putin in November 2014 would call Crimea a "strategic decision."¹³⁷ That was certainly so, though many of its costs were grossly underestimated and unforeseen. Nevertheless, looking back on Crimea, respected pundit Fedor Lukyanov argued that Putin was not a "strategist," but rather someone who operated on "intuition [and] a holistic view of the world" and "thinks in systemic categories." As a result, "a chain of tactical steps, reactive or simply inevitable, taken for granted in the given circumstances, acquire internal consistency."¹³⁸

In Lukyanov's estimation, Putin's talents had served Russia well as a world power:

Toward the end of 2013, Russia's international weight had grown incomparably in comparison to the end of the 1990's and even the mid-2000's. The country had reclaimed the toolkit of a global player—not a great power, but a state without which the most important world problems could not be solved. Putin's realism, his ability to determine the real current challenges and solve them with cold pragmatism, brought results.¹³⁹

Indeed, Putin at the beginning of 2014 seemed to have gained something of an attitude of superiority. He was now a major player on the world stage. He felt he could outdeal the West, even the United States. Putin's success in shielding Syria's Asad from Western and Arab pressure had played a part in this development. It added to Putin's self-confidence and to his disdain and even contempt for his Western interlocutors.¹⁴⁰ After the relatively easy success of Russia's Syrian chemical weapons proposal in getting Obama to walk back American threats to strike Asad's forces, this disdain applied especially to Obama, but even more widely to the gridlock of American politics that made it difficult for the American President to deliver on any commitments.¹⁴¹

However, on February 7, referencing various combinations and permutations of differences over Syria, Ukraine, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) and other human rights issues, and Russian asylum for National Security Agency leaker Edward Snowden, major Western leaders—American President Barack Obama, British Prime Minister David Cameron, French President François Hollande, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel—had all declined to join Putin in Sochi for the opening ceremony of the Olympics.¹⁴² Moreover, even before the games concluded on February 23, Russia's relations with the United States and NATO were quickly enveloped by another, even more dramatic turn in the already long-running Ukrainian crisis.

In December, Putin had appeared confident that his \$15 billion offer to President Yanukovich had secured Russia's strategic goals of foreclosing Ukrainian membership in NATO and the EU. On February 21, however, under pressure from demonstrators camped out for months on Kyiv's central Independence (Maydan) Square, Yanukovich signed a power-sharing deal with the opposition. Then, unexpectedly and to Moscow's dismay and disgust, Yanukovich fled Kyiv during the night of February 21–22.¹⁴³

Analysts and pundits assumed as late as the first half of February 2014 that Putin would coast on the laurels of his accomplishments in the Middle East. However, Putin's Crimean decision—while not foreordained or pre-planned—was actually made in the context of an already evolving, harder Russian line on Syria. Evidence began to suggest that there had been another

uptick in shipments of Russian ammunition, weapons, and spare parts to Syria in February 2014, if not a bit earlier.¹⁴⁴ The ebb and flow of Russian supplies to Syria was difficult to detect and measure. This increased flow could have been launched even before what were dubbed the “Geneva 2” talks—pursuant to the June 30, 2012, Geneva Communiqué¹⁴⁵—commenced in late January 2014.

For much of 2013, moreover, there had been little if any evidence of Russian pressure on Asad to negotiate with the opposition. And the Geneva 2 talks in January–February 2014 had deadlocked as Asad—not dissuaded by Moscow—pushed to run out the clock until new presidential elections eventually set for June 3 could be held. Putin was clearly determined to help Asad defeat the opposition in Syria as the two rounds of Geneva 2 talks stalled and even as Russian diplomats continued to say a “Geneva 3” was necessary.

In early February, as the Winter Olympics opened in Sochi, it seemed to observers in Moscow that the Kremlin no longer viewed Asad as it had in 2012. Then, he had been a troublesome and disposable Syrian leader who was a bit of an embarrassment for Moscow. Now, however, Asad had transformed himself into Exhibit A of the efficacy and value of Putin’s policy of independence and opposition to the United States. Analysts saw Putin sticking more firmly than ever to Plan A in Syria, which was to ensure Asad’s survival in power and reelection as president later in 2014.¹⁴⁶ Putin evidently had no need or desire for a Plan B in which Asad would be eased out of power for the sake of a political compromise in Syria.

Putin’s success in Syria thus helped set the stage for his approach to Ukraine by giving him the courage and confidence to act in Crimea, and soon to go even further in Donetsk and Luhansk in southeastern Ukraine, directly bordering Russia.

While there were some common motivating elements, there was also a big difference between the starting place for Putin’s reaction to Libya and the Arab Spring in 2011 and his 2014 reaction to Ukraine. Then, as eloquently voiced by Lavrov in January 2012, there had been a determination, even while acknowledging the hopelessness of Russia’s case, to oppose the United States and the West out of principle.¹⁴⁷ Now, in early 2014, with success in opposing the United States and major Arab and Western states on Syria, Putin had the wind in his sails as he headed into troubled Ukrainian waters.

After the March 17–18, 2014, formalization of the annexation of Crimea, some would suggest that Putin’s hardball approach to Ukraine augured an even harder Russian line in the Middle East, especially on Syria. However, the synergies were actually operating in the opposite direction. Looking back, one can argue that it was Putin’s successes and methods in the Middle

East that had encouraged him to undertake the annexation of Crimea, rather than that the successful annexation of Crimea had pushed him toward a harder line in the Middle East.

Certainly, Putin's determination to keep Asad in place and the central figure in Syrian politics was reinforced after Ukrainian President Yanukovich fled Kyiv late on February 21. But it was Putin's political actions and military successes in Syria—UN Security Council vetoes and transfers of military material—and their ramifications throughout the Middle East that, in retrospect, turned out to be a dress rehearsal for his improvised reaction to the collapse of his strategy toward Ukraine.

Second: The Security Dimension

Russian analysts would subsequently debate the relative weight of external security and domestic political factors in Putin's decisionmaking on Crimea. Most appeared to subscribe to the notion that Russia had to take Crimea because there was no way Putin was going to let Sevastopol become a NATO naval base should Ukraine join NATO. Many attributed primacy in Putin's decisionmaking to this issue. Dmitry Peshkov, Putin's spokesperson, would tell the BBC in November that Russia wanted a "100% guarantee" that Ukraine would never become a member of NATO.¹⁴⁸

This was in effect the Ukrainian analogue to Russia's top security concern in the Middle East. There, as we have seen, protection of Russia from Muslim jihadists turning their attention north toward Russia had long been a priority for Moscow. Russia had long sought to discourage any regional powers from sponsoring jihadists—especially Sunni extremists—and from subverting local regimes in Russia's Muslim-majority territories in the Northern Caucasus and Middle Volga regions, and even Moscow itself.

Besides keeping Ukraine out of NATO, Moscow had long made clear its demand that Ukraine join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) because of the size of its economy and its intimate links to that of Russia. Without Ukraine's participation, the EEU would make even less economic sense than the low degree of economic rationality that its critics attributed to it.¹⁴⁹

Having embarked in late February 2014 on the military option for pressuring Kyiv to bend to Moscow's will, it was not long before Putin took the next step of annexing Crimea. From his perspective, this would solve the Black Sea Fleet basing issue forever; Kyiv's ensuing territorial dispute with Moscow there and in nearby Donetsk and Luhansk would make NATO members reluctant to risk incorporating Ukraine into the Alliance; and Ukrainian alignment with the EU would likewise become more problematic.¹⁵⁰

Third: The Domestic Politics Dimension

As with the “big bang” that produced Putin’s response to the Syrian crisis in late 2011, Putin framed his response to the crisis in Ukraine in 2014 for maximum political benefit. At stake behind Putin’s decision to annex Crimea was not only Ukraine’s political, economic, and military orientation, but also the dangerous example so close to home that the successful Kyiv Maydan demonstrators set for a “color revolution” in Russia. Indeed, the anti-Putin demonstrations in Moscow and other large Russian cities in late 2011 and early 2012 were still a painful memory.

Some expert Moscow observers stressed a mix of intertwined motives. As one put it, Putin decided to annex Crimea to punish the Maydan demonstrators who had toppled Yanukovich and to solve the Sevastopol-base question definitively. At the same time, the Crimea move allowed him to sharply change the political situation inside Russia, and he quickly succeeded in scattering his opposition. A few argued that the main reason was not NATO enlargement and possible Western bases in Crimea at all, but rather Russian domestic politics. Opinion against Putin had been rising, but the annexation of Crimea turned that negative opinion trend around and helped—certainly well into 2015—improve and sustain Putin’s popularity.¹⁵¹

Putin had long twinned his opposition to NATO expansion with opposition to regime change by a “Libyan scenario” and especially now by a “color revolution.” The latter was almost always portrayed as being instigated by the United States rather than erupting out of local conflict conditions. With what appeared to be the sincerity of a true believer, Putin’s spokesperson Dmitry Peskov would again make the stark argument in November 2014.¹⁵²

Putin had been using the long-established narrative of U.S.-inspired “regime change”—beginning with the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, through many of the Arab Spring challenges to established authority, continuing with the mass demonstrations against him in 2011 and 2012 in Russia’s biggest cities, and now circling back to Ukraine with the Maydan protests. He used this narrative to portray Washington as the mastermind of conspiracies to oust him or Russia-friendly governments from power by financing and inspiring mass demonstrations against them. To this end, he had used anti-Americanism and Russian opposition to U.S. policy in Syria—the “Libyan scenario”—to bolster the image of Russia as an independent great power in order to keep his head above water in Russia.

Putin did not manufacture the Syrian crisis because of domestic political needs. But, when it came along, he used it skillfully to get a domestic boost. Now in Ukraine, Putin again deliberately chose to inflate rather than calm the crisis, in part because of the potential political returns

at home. On this domestic political plane, Syria once more in effect helped set the table for Putin's response to the crisis in Ukraine. As in Syria, Putin in Ukraine would amplify the independent big power, Russian nationalist, and anti-American themes that had served him so well as he had pursued his policy in the Middle East since late 2011. Both in Syria and in Crimea, Putin used Russian nationalist sentiment to prop up his legitimacy and ratings, rather than focusing on long-overdue economic reforms.

Success in Syria had had substantial positive political reverberations for Putin inside Russia. Nevertheless, Putin had reasons for wishing more. His support was still soft during the last half of 2013. Despite rising success in Syria, Putin's negatives were also rising inside Russia, according to Levada-Center polling. Putin's annexation of Crimea was designed to overcome this rise in negatives with its appeal to Russian nationalism.

In March 2013, Putin's approval rating had dropped to 52 percent, and by August had sagged to 47 percent.¹⁵³ By November, this recovered to 52 percent. But the proportion of respondents who viewed Putin basically unfavorably now stood at 29 percent, double that during his first and second presidential terms (9–15 percent). Moreover, if there were snap elections, just 47 percent would now vote for Putin, down from 55 percent a year earlier.¹⁵⁴ It could be argued that despite Putin's foreign policy accomplishments in 2013, especially his "success" in Syria, public opinion at home was beginning to display Putin fatigue and lack of enthusiasm.

Putin would later disclose that he made his decision on Crimea only after secretly conducting opinion polls. While he was referring to polling in Crimea, he no doubt had also studied potential opinion dynamics in Russia. Polling results would have suggested to him that annexation of Crimea could be the magic bullet for solving the nagging problem of his sagging political support—in the short run at least. It is thus easy to speculate that it was the Kremlin's own internal polling that may have pushed Putin over the line on his Crimea decision. If so, it proved an irresistible temptation despite the inevitable international storm that it would cause.

Indeed, the Sochi Winter Olympics and the annexation of Crimea helped boost Putin's ratings at home and strengthen his reputation abroad. Independent polling found that 79 percent of respondents supported the notion that the annexation of Crimea meant that Russia was reestablishing its traditional status as a great power.¹⁵⁵ According to the Levada-Center, negative views of the United States increased from 44 percent in January 2014 to 56 percent in March, while positive views decreased from 43 to 34 percent.¹⁵⁶ By November 2014, the negative proportion would reach 74 percent, while the positive would plummet to 18 percent.¹⁵⁷

Meanwhile, the Russian president's approval rating rose to 69 percent after the Olympics,¹⁵⁸ but the best was yet to come. After the annexation of Crimea, which 88 percent of those

Crimea: “It Is Ours”

Even critically thinking members of the Russian intelligentsia, who otherwise did not support Putin, supported him on the issue of Crimea and helped push the Russian president’s approval numbers through the roof. Oleg Kashin, for example, is an independent journalist who was brutally beaten with a crowbar on November 6, 2010, near his home in Moscow. After recovering, he went into self-exile in Switzerland.¹ From there, even Kashin wrote this about Crimea:

Yes, I cannot, I do not see in myself the moral strength to say that Crimea should be a part of Ukraine. It should not be. I readily agree with the fact that Putin’s Kremlin, in tearing Crimea from Ukraine, acted shamelessly and cynically in violating all spoken and unspoken international principles. [...] But any clear and obvious arguments are outweighed by this simple thing: yes, it is ours. Crimea became part of Ukraine as a result of two tragic accidents, one by Khrushchev and one by Yeltsin, and Putin’s annexation canceled these accidents. If Putin pays dearly for this annexation, furthermore, even if after some years they again separate Crimea from Russia, it still does not cancel the fact that Crimea is ours, is Russian.²

Like Oleg Kashin, an overwhelming proportion of Russian public opinion saw the annexation of Crimea as historically justified. The Crimea grab brought about what would be referred to as the “consolidation” of Russian society around the “National Leader,” that is, Putin.³ With his move into Crimea, Putin successfully tapped a deep well of nostalgia mixed with revenge in expressing what many Russians felt and wanted to say: we are back, and you cannot ignore us anymore. By November, polling found that 68 percent of respondents considered Russia a “great power,” up 20 points since September 2012.⁴

¹ Victor Davidoff, “The Kremlin Storm Troopers,” *Moscow Times*, November 11, 2013, available at <www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/the-kremlin-storm-troopers/489306.html>. For Kashin’s followup on his case, see “Journalist Turns to European Court Over Russia’s ‘Inaction’ in Finding His Attackers,” *Moscow Times Online*, December 23, 2014.

² Oleg Kashin, “For Soviets Without Bolsheviks: Is Anti-Putin Russian Nationalism Possible Right Now?” *Slon.ru*, June 16, 2014, available at <http://slon.ru/russia/za_sovety_bez_bolshevikov_vozmozen_li_seychas_antiputinskiy_russkiy_natsionalizm-1113455.xhtml>.

³ Presentation attended by author, Washington, DC, April 2014.

⁴ “68% of Russians Consider Russia a Great Power” Levada-Center, December 11, 2014, available at <www.levada.ru/11-12-2014/68-rossiyan-schitayut-rossiyu-velikoi-derzhavoi>.

polled favored,¹⁵⁹ 77 percent of those who had made up their minds declared that they would vote for Putin for president, up from 63 percent a year earlier.¹⁶⁰ A month later, this had risen to 81 percent.¹⁶¹

At the same time, Putin's approval rate climbed to 72 percent in early March, to 82 percent in late April, then to 83 percent in late May.¹⁶² The positive rating of Putin would stay in the 84–88 percent range from June 2014 to May 2015, then reach a record high 89 percent in June 2015, while his disapproval rating dropped from 34 percent in January 2014 to a record low 10 percent in June 2015.¹⁶³ At the end of 2014, paradoxically, Levada-Center polling suggested that the majority of Russians blamed sanctions on the West's determination to humiliate Russia and not on reaction to the annexation of Crimea.¹⁶⁴

By March 18, 2014, after the successful annexation of Crimea, Putin's aggrieved Russian nationalist speech in the Grand Kremlin Palace was the culmination of his post-December 2011 anti-Americanism, designed to nurture and appeal to a growing support base. Putin had used his opposition to the calls—the American ones in particular—for ousting President Asad in Syria to give voice and weight to this electoral strategy. Now, he had transposed the same theme to the Crimean context, with electrifying impact on the Russian electorate.

Finally: Ways and Means

With Yanukovich's abdication of the presidency, the Ukrainian opposition seized power and appeared intent once again on reversing Kyiv's strategic orientation away from Moscow. In turn, Putin evidently quickly came to the conclusion that his pursuit, using political and economic inducements, of at least Ukrainian neutrality toward NATO and the EU, even if short of full partnership with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union, had run its course. He would now employ more forceful military-political means.

In Syria, Putin had successfully used the naval Syrian Express covertly to transfer military hardware and supplies to the beleaguered Asad regime. In Crimea and then in southeastern Ukraine, Russia would employ similar methods not just to supply military material to local pro-Russian fighters, but even to insert Russian soldiers into battle. In fact, the means to do so would be largely one and the same in the case of Crimea. Illustrating the point was the *Nikolay Filchenkov*, a large landing ship and one of the Russian navy ships active in the Syrian Express. Now, on February 24, it ferried soldiers and APCs for the initial operation to take control of the peninsula.

Russia's naval Syrian Express, which was ferrying more cargo than ever to Syria as the Ukrainian crisis erupted, thus primed the pump for the surreptitious, semi-clandestine transfer

of arms and fighters to Russia's allies in southeast Ukraine that would follow. It would be even easier to transfer weapons and soldiers to Asad regime forces in Syria by short voyage via the Black Sea to nearby Crimea and then by land across the porous Russia-Ukraine border than had been the case using the longer route from the Black Sea through the Bosphorus and into Mediterranean waters.

What would come to be referred to widely as Russia's "hybrid" war entailed covert and not-so-covert—but all the same denied—military intervention backed by professional, powerful, and impressively effective propaganda, the latter in many ways superior to that of the Soviet period.¹⁶⁵ Kremlin spokesmen and propagandists would disavow charges of Russian military intervention in Crimea, first, and then into the southeastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in support of pro-Russian separatist forces inspired by Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Putin, however, would subsequently personally concede that Russia's military had played a role. "Of course, the Russian servicemen did back the Crimean self-defense forces. They acted in a civil but a decisive and professional manner," Putin said on his annual call-in show in April 2014.¹⁶⁶ Six months later, with encouragement from the Defense Ministry, the Russian Duma would consider designating October 7, Putin's birthday, as a day on which to honor the "polite men" in military uniforms bereft of insignias who had been so evident during Crimea's take-over.¹⁶⁷ Eventually, February 27—a date fraught with significance for Crimea—was chosen to commemorate Special Operations Forces Day.¹⁶⁸

With Crimea in hand, Putin was ready to move on.¹⁶⁹ In his March 18 Kremlin speech, the Russian president charged that over the years, "We have been cheated time and time again." However, with something now to show for Russian efforts in Syria the past few years, more widely in the Middle East, and most recently even closer to home in Ukraine, a confident Putin could assert that "Russia is an independent and active participant in international life. It, just like other countries, has national interests that should be taken into account and respected."¹⁷⁰

In this speech, Putin resurrected from Russian imperial history the concept of "Novorossiya" ("New Russia"). This was a reference to the extensive territories, including Crimea, north of the Black Sea that Russia's Catherine the Great had wrested from the Ottoman Empire in the late 18th century. Serious pundits regarded this as a flight away from realpolitik pragmatism into romantic fantasy. Putin was needlessly foreclosing future options by embracing Russian nationalistic rhetoric.¹⁷¹

Indeed, a war between pro-Russian separatists and Kyiv government forces would soon break out in early April in southeastern Ukraine, particularly in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, often referred to as the Donbas.¹⁷² Putin would support the separatists diplomatically

and militarily, sending substantial numbers of unmarked soldiers and military hardware and supplies across the border into the Donbas, especially in August 2014 when Kyiv would appear to be on the verge of a military victory. But the Russian president would repeatedly disappoint the pro-separatists by not moving toward outright annexation of the Donbas.¹⁷³ Making Crimea truly Russian would cost dearly, and adding incorporation of Novorossiya to the bill seemed simply out of the question.¹⁷⁴

Stress Test

Putin's Syria policy had helped set the table for his plunge into Ukraine. Now, as international reaction to Russia's military intervention in southeast Ukraine grew, it set in motion new turns in Russia-Middle East relations. While still not Moscow's highest priority, the region gained value as a venue for demonstrating that Russia was not isolated internationally. It also became marginally more important economically as a region to which Russia could turn to compensate to some degree in some sectors for the impact of Western sanctions.

In June 2014, with Putin's approval ratings running sky-high, there were some Russian Middle East watchers who judged that Putin had transferred Russia's competition with the West to Ukraine. Syria was still a priority. Neither side would win in Syria, but Russian society valued an independent stance there. However, Ukraine was now far more important for Putin's ratings than Syria ever was. There were no real Russian interests in Syria. It had been more a place for Putin to enhance his domestic rating, so it was now less important for Russia to sink resources into Syria.¹⁷⁵

All the same, Russia's gains in the Middle East since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in late 2010 not only held fast as the Ukrainian conflict flared, but even matured. Moreover, as the Ukrainian conflict metastasized beyond the bloodless annexation of Crimea to the increasingly ugly and bloody war between Kyiv and pro-Russian separatist forces in southeastern Ukraine, Russia's improved positions in the Middle East came to serve another vital function: helping Moscow avoid international isolation. This was especially helpful after the tragic downing of a civilian airliner over southeastern Ukraine helped solidify European support for American sanctions against Russia.

On July 16, Asad was inaugurated into his third term as Syrian president. Putin was starting to regain traction internationally after the shock of his annexation of Crimea. The next day, however, as fighting raged in the Donbas, a projectile hit Malaysian Airlines Flight MH 17 over the skies of separatist-controlled territory between the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, killing all

298 passengers and crew. Their remains fell to Earth onto fields near the village of Grabovo, not far from the Russian border.

The belongings of the MH 17 victims were looted, their scattered bodies left unattended and exposed to the elements. Some remains were not recovered until November, months later. All of this provoked outrage, especially in Europe, and international furor over Russia's military intervention in Ukraine spiked, hitting Putin for a loop. Kyiv could no doubt be faulted for not having formally closed the airspace above this battle zone. But the MH 17 passengers were more likely than not the unintended targets of a missile fired by pro-Russian separatists from a Russian-made Buk (SA-11) mobile air defense platform.¹⁷⁶

The specter of Libya's Qadhafi was again in the air. In the aftermath of the downing of MH 17, well-known Russian pundit Tatyana Stanovaya suggested that Putin was in danger of becoming an international "pariah" as southeastern Ukraine threatened to become an Afghanistan-like quagmire for Russia.¹⁷⁷ Others would later suggest that Putin ran the risk of being tagged another Qadhafi for the similarities between the downing of MH 17 and the blowing up of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in December 1988.¹⁷⁸ Relations between Washington and Moscow deteriorated further. Their frostiness began to resemble that following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late December 1979 and the Soviet downing of Korean Air Lines (KAL) Flight 007 in early September 1983.¹⁷⁹ Even before this, independent Russian analysts had begun to describe the escalating East-West tensions as a new Cold War.¹⁸⁰

The chilliness extended even to Germany, especially after the MH 17 tragedy. Putin's violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity—enshrined most recently in the Budapest Memorandum of 1994—had already provoked Chancellor Angela Merkel's deep distrust. That now worsened and finally swung German public opinion around to support a new round of extensive energy and financial sanctions.¹⁸¹

The atmosphere deteriorated further after Ukrainian government forces achieved substantial success in pushing pro-Russia separatists back from front lines in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in August. On August 28, in what Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and NATO described as a military invasion, unmarked Russian military supplies and personnel poured into the Donbas region. Russian forces, backed by another wave of propaganda out of Moscow, mounted a major 5-day counteroffensive that smashed and pushed back Ukrainian forces.¹⁸² Sticking to the script, however, the Russian Foreign Ministry would only concede that Russian "volunteers" were fighting on both sides of the conflict in Ukraine.¹⁸³

The Russian campaign quickly achieved its objective of preventing pro-Russian separatist forces in Donetsk and Luhansk from having to forfeit control of the region to Kyiv. Putin forced

Poroshenko in effect to sue for peace and accept less than full sovereignty over “Novorossiya.” A ceasefire was agreed on September 5, though fighting continued to wax and wane after that.

The ceasefire all but collapsed in November as Russia again sent significant numbers of unmarked tanks and trucks and insignia-less soldiers into the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.¹⁸⁴ The ongoing conflict in the Donbas handicapped Kyiv from presenting Ukraine as an attractive candidate for NATO membership and closer EU association. Still, the newly elected Rada put in motion consideration of overturning Ukraine’s 2010 neutrality law and pointing the nation toward full membership in NATO.¹⁸⁵

Despite the MH 17 incident and the growing impact on Russia’s economy of Western sanctions, Putin got great marks at home for his Ukrainian campaigns, even while getting terrible marks in Europe and the United States.

But what about the Middle East? Here there was little outrage in elite and leadership opinion over events in Ukraine. Instead, the reactions ranged from quiet neutrality to open admiration to even welcome for the return of significant East-West friction on the world stage.

The reasons were various. The downing of MH 17 on July 17 coincided with the start of the 50-day war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, and came amidst the sweeping advances by the Sunni extremist jihadist group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, out of Syria into Iraq.¹⁸⁶ By early April 2014, the joint efforts of the Asad regime, Hezbollah forces, Iranian assistance, and Russian military supplies and diplomatic support had brought a noticeable if tense break in the intensity of fighting. Opposition forces were forced to ratchet down their efforts in key battlegrounds such as the city of Homs, but the regime has lost control of much of Syrian territory.¹⁸⁷ Increasingly, it was ISIS that began to dominate the battlefield in Syria.¹⁸⁸

These two developments—the advances of ISIS and the Gaza war—absorbed much of the attention of the countries in the region, and thrust forward new priorities and trade-offs. Iran, in addition, was focused on its negotiations with the P5+1, which were about to be extended to November 24. Some more intangible factors were also at work to explain the deafening silence in the region on MH 17 and the Ukrainian conflict.

In the Arab world, polling done in the Middle East between the annexation of Crimea and the shooting down of MH 17 did not suggest that the Ukrainian crisis was damaging perceptions of Russia among Arab publics. In fact, positive views of Russia during this period did not lag far behind appreciation for America (36 percent versus 43 percent, respectively). Meanwhile, negative views toward Russia and the United States were on a par (20 percent versus 19 percent), while neutral attitudes toward each were also not far apart (28 percent toward Russia versus 25 percent toward America). The researchers attributed negative opinion toward the

United States almost entirely to American support for Israel. At the same time, they noted that the United States was still the favorite destination for Arab travel, with Russia far behind.¹⁸⁹

Early on, a major American newspaper pictured Russia as isolated in the UN General Assembly vote on March 27 on Resolution 68/262. This declared the annexation of Crimea illegal.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, one hundred nations, including Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Turkey, joined the United States and European Union countries in voting for the resolution.

However, there were some notable instances of countries in the Middle East that did not support the resolution. As could be expected, only Syria voted with Russia against the resolution. However, Egypt and Iraq abstained. And Israel, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen were all absent when the vote was taken.¹⁹¹ Their various motivations in not voting against Russia on the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution pointed to enduring points of diplomatic convergence in Russian-Middle Eastern relations.

Iran

Iran's abstention was understandable, though still curious, since it put Iran in the same vote column as archenemy Israel. Russia's interference in Ukraine revived historical grievances in Iran over past Russian and Soviet territorial aggrandizement at Tehran's expense.¹⁹² However, Iran had few equities in Ukraine and thus had little reason to roil unnecessary waters with Russia, a key and sometimes sympathetic player in the P5+1 negotiations. Whenever those negotiations concluded, commentary in Tehran suggested that Iran would want to keep both Russia and the United States engaged and competing with each other for its favors afterwards, rather than giving preference to one or the other.¹⁹³

Early on, Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov had suggested that Russian retaliation against U.S. and Western sanctions for Crimea could involve Iran. According to Ryabkov, Ukraine was a supreme interest for Russia and far outranked the Iran nuclear file.¹⁹⁴ However, by July, Ryabkov asserted that, "there are no grounds for fearing that the Ukraine situation will become a 'bomb' under the talks on the Iranian nuclear program or prevent its fruitful progress."¹⁹⁵

In the meantime, despite differences on the nuclear issue, Iran and Russia had been co-operating in bolstering the Asad regime in Damascus, and in recent years both had suggested the need to expand their cooperation in the region. By October 2014, Nikolay Patrushev and his Iranian counterpart Ali Shamkhani, top "secretaries" of the two countries' National Security Councils, would finally sign the "Memorandum on Mutual Understanding and Cooperation" between the apparatuses of the Russian and Iranian Security Councils that had been drafted 3 years earlier, in November 2011.¹⁹⁶

However, with Russia now under pressure from Western sanctions, and more of a supplicant than earlier for closer relations with Iran, some in Tehran underscored the limited writ of the Memorandum. Patrushev's message, in this view, had been clear: Iran would remain a key regional partner for Russia. However, the joint fight against terrorism and narcotics did not amount to "close and strategic relations."¹⁹⁷

Indeed, there had been no resolution of the sore issue of the broken S-300 air defense systems contract. Iran's \$3.9 billion suit for damages in the Geneva Court of Arbitration had still not been settled.¹⁹⁸ As with Russia's abstention on the Libya UNSC resolution in March 2011, many in Moscow considered then-President Medvedev's annulment of the contract in October 2010 to have been a mistake.¹⁹⁹ However, one observer of the region argued that the Iranians would never get the S-300 because Putin valued friendship with Israel as more important than with Iran. In part, this was because there was no Iranian lobby in the U.S. Congress, but there was a robust and effective AIPAC (American Israeli Public Affairs Committee).²⁰⁰

Putin and newly elected President Rouhani would meet three times in 2014.²⁰¹ Rouhani had long experience with Russia through all the ups and downs of the relationship. In June 1989, he accompanied then Majles Speaker and soon-to-be President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to Moscow as Russia and Iran resurrected ties after the estrangement over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Soviet support of Iraq during most of the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq war.²⁰² Likewise, National Security Council secretary Shamkhani had served as defense minister under President Khatami and had had mixed experiences with Moscow. In September 2002, he complained bitterly that Russia did not want a stronger Iran and therefore would not sell it even defensive hardware and equipment.²⁰³

Nevertheless, Iran and Russia engaged throughout 2014 in negotiations to try to reenergize bilateral trade to relieve the pressure of Western sanctions, now also affecting Russia. Russia had worked hard to resolve procedural problems—visas, etc.—so it would be ready to move ahead with expanding business when this was possible. Never impressive, trade was in dire straits by the end of 2013. It had declined drastically to 2002 or 2003 levels: some \$1.6 billion in 2013.²⁰⁴

In 2014, despite efforts and much publicity, especially on the Russian side, trade dropped even lower: to \$963 million.²⁰⁵ In some cases, physical volumes did not decrease, explained experts in Moscow as they elaborated on why the amount was less than \$1 billion, but the valuation of trade volumes did diminish because of the drop in the value of the ruble.²⁰⁶ Moreover, Iran routed some trade through third countries in order to skirt Russian direct high import duties, and thus trade was very likely higher than what was reflected by the official statistic.²⁰⁷

By the end of 2014, little had changed. With the nuclear negotiations perhaps nearing resolution, the sense in Moscow of competition by the United States and Europe for future post-sanctions business and influence in Iran began to inject some urgency into Russia's efforts to bolster its own shaky political and economic positions in that country.²⁰⁸ Nevertheless, although a \$20 billion oil-for-goods exchange was being widely discussed, as well as an \$8–\$10 billion electrical energy deal, technical and other barriers stood in the way.²⁰⁹

Politically, relations were very good, noted Moscow experts. There were a lot of visits and economic negotiations. But none of this was being transformed into anything concrete. The Iranians were saying, “we are now both under sanctions and need to work more closely.” But it made Russian officials uncomfortable to be put on the same level with Iranians. The Russian government supported Russian business involvement in Iran, but Russian business did not like the risks of running afoul of Western sanctions on Iran. Even Russian advocates of moving toward a “strategic partnership” with Iran conceded that, while Russia-Iran economic cooperation had serious potential, there were no serious achievements because of internal opposition on both sides to moving ahead.²¹⁰

Rajab Safarov, a vocal Iranian lobbyist in Moscow, complained to Putin at his December 2014 press conference that “You promised to visit Iran last year, but you haven’t. You promised to sign a large economic agreement with Iran, but this hasn’t come about either.”²¹¹ Nevertheless, likely more for political reasons than for profit, Rosatom had committed in November to building at least two new units at Bushehr.²¹² Given Bushehr-1’s tortured history, implementation of the new contract will likely be a long-term and painful proposition.²¹³

Relations between Russia and Iran were thus likely to continue to be an uncomfortable mix of sour historical memories, fresh friction over more recent issues, and lost economic opportunities. After a visit to Tehran late in the year, the pundit Fedor Lukyanov wrote, “Behind the doubts [in Tehran] as to the reliability of our word is far more serious distrust.”²¹⁴ The view in Moscow among analysts most familiar with Tehran was that Iran would always be a difficult partner. Iran was now flirting with everyone. Strategic partnership with Iran was impossible for Russia, however, because the Iranians could not be strategic partners with anyone.²¹⁵ Nevertheless, there would be Russian-Iranian cooperation in some areas where interests coincided, especially since Iran was useful to Russia in the short term to show the West that Russia had other options.²¹⁶

When I visited Russia in February 2015, expert opinion in Moscow was still stuck in this rut. Tehran was playing for time until the outcome of the nuclear negotiations was clear, agreed observers. If there was a deal, Iran looked forward to warmer political and economic relations

with the United States and Europe, but would balance them with ties to Russia. This was Plan A. If there was no deal, Iran would move closer to Russia but still not too close: a rather unattractive Plan B.²¹⁷

Both Russia and Iran wanted to use each other; there was no real partnership. Each country was chasing its own political goals, and there was no basis for large-scale economic cooperation. The Iranians were more interested in Europe and America than in Russia, which could provide more nuclear power plants (NPPs) and weapons to Iran but little else. There would be Russian-Iranian cooperation but not nearly as grand as the \$20 billion sometimes speculated. Policymakers in Moscow knew all of this, but were playing a political game. Yes, there would be a Putin trip to Tehran in 2015, but it was difficult to nail down the date with the Ukrainian crisis in full flare.²¹⁸

Behind the scenes, though, the ice had already begun to crack in high-level contacts between Moscow and Tehran in January. With the P5+1 negotiations resuming in Geneva after the holiday break and facing a self-imposed March 30 deadline to reach a framework agreement,²¹⁹ Defense Minister Shoygu visited Tehran on January 19–20. It was the first visit by a Russian defense minister to the Iranian capital in 15 years.²²⁰ A week later, Supreme Leader Khamenei's senior advisor Ali Akbar Velayati met in Moscow with Putin, Lavrov, and Energy Minister Novak.²²¹

On the eve of Shoygu's visit, preeminent arms transfer expert Ruslan Pukhov cautioned that “one can't expect any large-scale military technological cooperation with Iran in any foreseeable future because the Iranians feel betrayed and insulted.”²²² In addition, explained Pukhov, “Russia has a secret obligation to Israel not to deliver S-300s to either Iran or Syria. This will be a major obstacle [for the development of arms trade between Russia and Iran] because the Iranians have made their position clear—either deliver the S-300s or get lost.”²²³

Nevertheless, Shoygu and his Iranian counterpart Dehqan announced in Tehran that they had decided to resolve the S-300 issue.²²⁴ A few days later, Sergey Chemezov, general director of Rostekh—the State Corporation for Assisting the Development, Production, and Export of High-Tech Industrial Products—revealed that two months earlier it had conveyed its readiness to sell Iran five divisions of Antey-2500 (S-300VM) surface-to-air missile systems. If this did not suit Iran, Russia was ready to transfer state-of-the-art S-400 Triumf systems. In either case, Iran must first drop its lawsuit over the 2010 annulment of the S-300 contract and its claim of \$4 billion in damages.²²⁵

Two months later, on April 2, P5+1 negotiators in Lausanne, Switzerland, concluded a framework nuclear agreement with Iran that would have to be fleshed out into a final accord by

June 30.²²⁶ Should that prove successful, the assumption among Russian experts quoted in the Russian press was that Russia could then—and not before—again sell S-300 systems to Iran. But there would have to be a new contract since the original agreement had been annulled. Moreover, the systems originally destined for Iran had been dispersed to the Russian Armed Forces and/or scavenged, and production of the S-300PMU1 system had been discontinued.²²⁷

Beyond the S-300, resumption of sales of Russian offensive arms to Iran could only go forward if the nuclear negotiations in Geneva were successfully completed and the UN Security Council issued a new resolution lifting and/or redefining its June 2010 prohibitions on arms transfers to Iran. Prospects would then be bright for Russian arms exporters to compete for the lion's share of the anticipated Iranian needs for \$11–\$13 billion in new weapons.

Competition from the West would be tough, of course, but Russia would have an edge given Iranian experience with Russian weapons. But this was one of the few niches in the Iranian economy where Russia might enjoy such a competitive advantage against stiff Western pressure to reclaim Iranian markets. Freed of sanctions, Iran would once again be able to choose and bargain, and Russia would have to compete.²²⁸ Moreover, elsewhere in the Middle East, Western powers—especially the United States—would continue to monopolize arms sales.²²⁹

However, without waiting until June 30, Putin surprised the world on April 13 when he issued a decree that reversed Medvedev's 2010 suspension of the original contract and allowed S-300 transfers to Iran to go forward.²³⁰ Visiting Moscow, Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, praised Putin's "good will."²³¹ This was the same Shamkhani who as defense minister complained in September 2002 that Russia did not want a stronger Iran.²³² Defense Minister Hosein Dehqan, also in Moscow the week of Putin's decision, de-claimed that "Bearing in mind our common views, we have come to the conclusion that we can form a new world order together and participate in regional cooperation."²³³

Putin's move clearly seemed to have been in the works for several months. His S-300 gambit was designed to get Russia's foot in the door of the Iranian market, not to upset the final round of nuclear negotiations. Russia, in fact, wanted them to succeed so that Moscow could go beyond S-300 sales to Iran.²³⁴ Rather than aiming to scuttle a final agreement, the Russian president's decree was indicative of Moscow's anxiousness to quickly improve relations with Iran and to give them more economic substance before Western business has a chance to return full force to Iran.²³⁵

Putin's decree sets the stage for an S-300 deal worth around \$1 billion—or more if Iran goes for a more modern and capable system. It also is aimed at avoiding the risk of \$4 billion in penalties sought by Iran for breach of contract. For Iran, a deal would draw Russia closer

but not commit Iran to an exclusive partnership. In fact, Iran likely sees a new S-300 deal as a lever to encourage Western states to do more and compete with Russia for Iran's "affection." But Iran will not be able to become a full member of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO)—in which Russia is a senior partner—until all sanctions are lifted following a successful final nuclear accord.²³⁶

Unless European and American banking sanctions on Iran are lifted as part of a final June 30 nuclear agreement, Russia cannot grow its bilateral trade with Iran. These sanctions will continue to place effective barriers in front of a revival of Russian-Iranian trade. As before, Energy Minister Aleksandr Novak quickly dumped cold water on happy talk about a \$20 billion energy-for-goods barter agreement. There was no oil-for-goods arrangement in place, he underscored. Ramping up trade depended most of all on lifting financial sanctions so that Iran could pay Russia with money and not goods.²³⁷

Putin's S-300 gesture on April 13 was therefore meant to encourage Iran to go the distance in the nuclear negotiations. At the same time, it gained Putin approval points at home for another display of independent Russian foreign policy. Many Russian experts have long considered the S-300 contract annulment a mistake. Putin could count on his decision being popular with them and across the board as another sign of Russian independence and assertiveness in the world against the United States.

Since 2010, Tehran has persisted in driving home the point that Russia must honor the original S-300 contract. Tehran has now gotten an apology of sorts from Moscow. This has required some verbal sleight of hand by Putin. When Medvedev annulled the S-300 contract in 2010, Moscow insisted on the fiction that the UNSC resolution required this.²³⁸ On April 13, when Putin in effect resurrected the contract, he adhered to the fiction that Medvedev's 2010 decree had merely frozen or suspended the contract rather than outright canceled it. In the Russian capital, some professional Iran watchers called it a purely political decision designed to play to Iran's vanity.²³⁹ Having succeeded in getting Moscow to eat crow, however, Tehran now must decide which system it really wants and how much it is willing to pay for it.²⁴⁰

Israel

Of the countries not supporting the March 2014 UNGA resolution, Israel was the most startling. As Irina Zviagelskaya of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow has noted, Israel was "absent" ostensibly because of a strike in the Israeli Foreign Ministry. However, Israel could easily have sent an official to the UN to cast a vote if it had wanted.²⁴¹

Moscow's exaggeration of anti-Semitism in Ukraine may have been calculated in part to swing Israeli audiences against criticizing the Russian move. Whatever the case, Israel's then-Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman—a Russian speaker born in Moldova—stated on April 23, 2014, that Israel would not choose sides in the Russia-Ukraine dispute.²⁴² Furthermore, in September, Israel reportedly turned down a request by Kyiv to purchase drones (unmanned aerial vehicles) for use against Donbas separatists purportedly in part out of concern that Russia might retaliate by selling more arms to Iran and Syria.²⁴³ Presumably, these included the infamous S-300. Russia had broken the contract with Iran for this air-defense missile system in 2010, and more recently disrupted delivery of the same to Syria.²⁴⁴

Russia evidently appreciated Israeli neutrality on Ukraine. A veteran Russian analyst of the Middle East noted that Russia rebuked Israel in the mildest terms over its otherwise widely condemned—including by the United States—conduct during the Gaza war.²⁴⁵ This expert wondered whether Israel would again resist or instead cave in to United States pressure the next time a vote similar to that in March came up in the UN General Assembly.²⁴⁶

However, Moscow's support of the P5+1 nuclear negotiations with Iran and Putin's surprise April 13, 2015, decision to allow the S-300 transfers to go forward are making managing relations with Israel more challenging for Moscow. The S-300 decision in particular has disrupted Israeli assumptions about Tel Aviv's leverage in Moscow. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu regarded Putin's move with "great severity."²⁴⁷ As a reminder that Israel is ultimately less important to Russia than Iran, it has been an unwelcome comeuppance to Netanyahu and Lieberman's Russia policy.

Putin has publicly defended the transfer of the "exclusively defensive" S-300 system to Iran. But the sudden snub to Israeli interests after years of courting Tel Aviv's favor does not come without potential downsides for Moscow. These include the possible reversal of Israel's apparent policy, since Putin's move into Crimea, of not selling military equipment to Kyiv. So far, Putin has shrugged off reports of possible Israeli arms sales to Ukraine as "counterproductive," though their rightful choice.²⁴⁸ Furthermore, few Middle East watchers in Moscow see the S-300 disruption as anything more than a brief blip on the screen of a deep and multifaceted Russian-Israeli relationship that neither side wants to abandon.²⁴⁹

Iraq

As noted, Iraq and Egypt both abstained on the UNGA vote on Ukraine in March 2014. Iraq's decision may have been best explained at the time by the influence of Tehran in Baghdad. By June, however, Sunni-radical ISIS forces had begun a lightning campaign out of Syria into

Iraq, attacking Samarra on June 5 and capturing Mosul on June 9 before heading toward Baghdad. The Shia-dominant leadership in Baghdad suddenly had an even more urgent existential reason to court Moscow's good graces.

This impulse would only increase in the months ahead, even as Russian forces in late August began to push back Ukrainian government forces in southeast Ukraine despite Western condemnation. International attention more and more focused instead on the rising menace posed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria.²⁵⁰ ISIS had already beheaded one American journalist and would soon behead another. But ISIS would also threaten Russia, posting a video promising to topple Putin from power for supporting the Syrian regime and to take the war to the Russian North Caucasus to liberate it.²⁵¹

In June, Moscow had obliged on an urgent basis Baghdad's requests to the international community for help. Although President Obama decided on June 19 to send 300 military advisors to Iraq,²⁵² and some U.S. airstrikes began against targets in northern Iraq on August 8,²⁵³ he declared 2 weeks later that the United States "does not have a strategy yet" for airstrikes against ISIS forces in Syria and Iraq.²⁵⁴ On September 22, a U.S.-led coalition of Arab and European powers finally began an aerial bombing campaign against ISIS in Syria, with plans to train ground forces for later land attacks. But President Obama continued to resist calls for a return of even limited American "boots on the ground" to Iraq.

Obama's measured response to ISIS advances was in part aimed at forcing Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki toward a more inclusive approach to the country's Sunni population, or failing that, to encourage a change of leadership in Baghdad.²⁵⁵ For Russia, this was not a priority issue. Putin's initial reaction was thus notably quicker than Washington's hesitation and as such was much appreciated in Baghdad, both by the Maliki administration and that of Haider al-Abadi, who replaced Maliki on August 14. As Washington slowly responded to the advance of ISIS into Iraq, Putin began to send Su-25 ground attack fighter jets to Iraq on an urgent basis. The first of nine aircraft and the technicians to get them into fighting shape arrived by June 29.²⁵⁶

Iraq reportedly had concluded contracts for \$4.2 billion worth of Russian helicopters and anti-aircraft missile systems in 2012–2013, and by July 2014 would put in an order for other systems worth more than \$1 billion.²⁵⁷ In January 2015, Moscow reportedly acceded to Baghdad's request—in light of the dramatic drop in oil prices—to delay payment until after 2016.²⁵⁸ Later there would also be assertions that Ukraine-related bank sanctions on Russia were making it hard for both sides to conclude some payment transactions.²⁵⁹

Doing the sums, Andrey Frolov, an expert in the transfer of arms at the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST) in Moscow, determined that Iraq was among the top

importers of Russian arms in the world in 2014, in sixth place with 6 percent of Russia's known sales.²⁶⁰ On May 21, 2015, again under pressure after ISIS captured Ramadi on May 17, Prime Minister Abadi returned to Moscow looking for more Russian weapons, reportedly already having secured from Washington the month before an order for 1,000 AT-4 hand-held anti-tank grenade launchers.²⁶¹

As impressive as Iraq's purchases of Russian arms have been, analysts in Moscow underscore that Russia's energy interests in Iraq may surpass even arms sales in importance.²⁶² Leasing the pack and capping a 25-year effort with many harrowing ups and downs, Lukoil on July 19, 2014, for example, finally began shipping oil from the West Qurna 2 field, one of the largest in the world, out of the southern Iraqi port of Basra.²⁶³

All in all, Iraq's abstention on the UNGA resolution in March 2014 condemning the annexation of Crimea seemed to be paying off.²⁶⁴

Egypt

Relations between Cairo and Moscow flourished throughout the Ukrainian crisis, reflected in Egypt's abstention on the March 2014 UNGA vote. Moscow had been quietly delighted when a coalition led by army chief General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi had ousted and jailed president and Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi on July 3, 2013. Morsi had replaced long-time secular strongman President Hosni Mubarak, ousted in February 2011, in one of the Arab Spring's major landmarks. A decade earlier, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation had deemed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization and prohibited its activity on the territory of Russia.²⁶⁵ That designation still stood and had not been amended.

However, dealing with reality, Putin had met with Morsi in Sochi on April 19, 2013. Morsi, also dealing with reality, came under some criticism for going against earlier pledges not to deal with Putin.²⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Morsi called for a "real union" between the two countries and urged Russia to return to Egypt to work on priority Aswan dam, steel mill, and aluminum plant projects.²⁶⁷

All the same, Russia clearly welcomed the return of secular military power in Cairo. In contrast, in response to the military's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, the United States suspended the disbursement of \$260 million in aid after Morsi's ouster and the delivery of Apache helicopters, F-16 fighter jets, and other major items.²⁶⁸ Unlike the United States, Russia would not criticize the repression of the Brotherhood in Egypt that resumed under Sisi after Morsi's ouster.²⁶⁹ In return, as one long-time expert in Moscow on Russian military-political ties

would suggest, countries such as Egypt, with a history of anti-Americanism, did not have any “complexes” about dealing with Russia.²⁷⁰

Just a month after the U.S. freeze of arms deliveries to Egypt, Foreign Minister Lavrov and Defense Minister Shoygu visited Cairo on November 13–14 and discussed arms sales. Initial reports suggested that success could translate into more than \$4 billion in new contracts, though skeptics at the time suggested they were more likely to be in the \$1–\$2 billion range.²⁷¹

Egyptian Defense Minister Sisi met with Putin in Moscow on February 13, 2014. In greeting Sisi, Putin publicly revealed and endorsed Sisi’s forthcoming presidential candidacy.²⁷² Sisi was in the Russian capital with Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy, with their counterparts Shoygu and Lavrov, for continuation of the so-called 2+2 talks begun in November in Cairo.

While Egypt and Russia had declared a “strategic partnership” in June 2009, little if any mention had been made of that concept since the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011.²⁷³ After the Moscow 2+2 talks, however, Lavrov said that they reflected “the mature nature of our partnership, which has started to acquire traces of strategic partnership.”²⁷⁴ Several months later, Moscow was reportedly again pressing Cairo for help in controlling the radicalization of students from the North Caucasus studying in Egyptian religious schools.²⁷⁵

After his election in late May and inauguration on June 8, Sisi met with Putin in Sochi on August 12, 2014, during Sisi’s first trip abroad. They discussed an extensive revitalization of relations, including trade in agricultural products, a Russian industrial zone in a new Suez Canal project, and arms transfers. Putin revealed that a protocol on “military technical cooperation” had been signed in March. Russia was already supplying Egypt with arms, he said, and had “agreed to expand this cooperation.”²⁷⁶

Commentary in Cairo argued that the “bundle of painful Egyptian-Russian messages to Washington” was intended to impart “equilibrium” and “diversification” to Egyptian foreign policy.²⁷⁷ Indeed, on May 7, none other than Sisi had declared that Russia was “no alternative” for Egypt to the United States.²⁷⁸ And after Sisi’s bilateral talks with Obama on September 25 at the UNGA in New York, Cairo commentary suggested that despite differences over treatment of the Muslim Brotherhood and arms purchases from Russia, Sisi had successfully eased tensions with Washington and cast Egypt as a partner of the United States in the war against ISIS.²⁷⁹

In Moscow, some Russian experts viewed Sisi as playing the old Cold War game once again and using anti-American propaganda to improve his domestic support. Even before the Ukrainian crisis, they observed, there were those in Egypt who wanted relations with Russia to be more like relations under Nasser, the leader under whom Soviet relations with Egypt had flourished in the 1950s and 1960s until Sadat reversed course in the 1970s. Now Sisi was positioning

himself as another Nasser. This was of course a small plus for Russia. But so far there were no indications that Russia wanted to become an alternative to the United States in the Middle East.²⁸⁰

Others speculated that Sisi intended to develop Egyptian relations with both the United States and Russia while keeping in close contact with Saudi Arabia. Sisi had visited Riyadh before proceeding to Sochi, and all assumed Saudi Arabia would bankroll any new Egyptian purchases of Russian arms.²⁸¹ Rumors to that effect had been circulating in Moscow since fall 2013, gaining traction after Lavrov and Shoygu's visit to Cairo in November.²⁸²

A month after the Putin-Sisi meeting in Sochi, Alexander Fomin, director of the Russian Federal Service for Military Technological Cooperation, revealed that the two countries had initialed draft contracts for Russian arms worth \$3.5 billion. According to Egyptian and other sources, Cairo's shopping list included Kornet anti-tank guided missile systems; Tor-M1, Tor-M2E, Buk-M2E, S-300, and S-400 surface-to-air missile systems (SAMs); Ka-25, Mi-8, and Mi-17 helicopters; MiG-29 and MiG-35 fighter jets; and diesel electric submarines. In addition, Egypt planned to modernize Soviet-era arms that still remained in its inventories, and Russia would establish a service center for Russian helicopters.²⁸³ Andrey Frolov ranked Egypt as number one in the world in 2014 for known new weapons contracts with Russia, accounting for 34 percent of the global pie.²⁸⁴

Moscow was doing well in Egypt, but was clearly wary of overreaching as it dealt with Cairo. After Sisi's successful summit with Putin in Sochi, some Russian experts thought that the Russian Navy, kicked out by Sadat in April 1976, would again establish basing facilities in Alexandria. Others, however, argued this was a doubtful proposition.²⁸⁵

Given Egyptian sensitivity to the idea of foreign military bases on Egyptian soil, Lavrov treated the idea of a Russian naval base at Alexandria warily during his November 2013 visit to Cairo. The base question was "rather overstated," he told the newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. "The Americans have a colossal fleet there [in the Mediterranean], same as the French and others." Russia "cannot spite the United States because the Americans will never lose their influence" in Egypt and the Middle East.²⁸⁶

Sisi hosted Putin in Cairo on February 9–10, 2015. The two sides agreed that Rosatom would build an NPP in Egypt.²⁸⁷ Although Putin gave Sisi a Kalashnikov rifle as a gift, they did not announce any new arms contracts. Instead, Putin underscored Russian wheat exports to Egypt and imports of agricultural goods from Egypt as key components of boosting bilateral trade, in addition to cooperation in the energy field. Four hundred companies with Russian capital were registered in Egypt, he asserted, and over 3 million Russian tourists visited Egypt in 2014. Prior to the visit, analysts in Moscow had speculated that the relationship might again

be elevated to that of a “strategic partnership.”²⁸⁸ In Cairo, however, Putin went no further than calling Egypt Russia’s “reliable partner and friend.”²⁸⁹

Sisi, however, described Russia more enthusiastically as a “strategic friend and a real asset for its balanced foreign relations.” He reportedly stated that the two sides had agreed to continue boosting military cooperation, but gave no details.²⁹⁰ Within a few days, however, French President Hollande announced a \$5.9 billion sale of military hardware to Egypt. It would include 24 Rafale fighter jets and a naval frigate.²⁹¹ Saudi Arabia, it was widely presumed, would pay for the bulk of the arms.²⁹² It suggested to some observers that Saudi Arabia, which had just undergone a royal succession, was no longer willing to bankroll Egyptian purchases of Russian arms, but was more than willing to foot the bill for French and other weapons.²⁹³

In Moscow, one expert on the region suggested that the United States—in taking the lead on the coalition against ISIS and in leaning toward the Saudis on the developing crisis in Yemen—was finally succeeding in recovering from the debacle in 2013 of ignoring its own red line on the use of chemical weapons in Syria. A reconsolidation of U.S.-Arab ties was now developing and no one wanted to deal with Russia at the cost of angering Washington. Egypt might be dallying with Russia, but it did not constitute a real strategic turn on Egypt’s part. The Egyptian purchase of French arms two days after Putin left Cairo, argued this expert, proved the point.

Another seasoned observer cautioned, however, that Saudi willingness to pay for Egyptian arms from Russia still existed. Egypt might not now buy Russian jet fighters, but anti-aircraft systems were still the most valuable item for Cairo. Nevertheless, there would be no such thing as a real close friendship between Russia and Egypt. Cairo was not changing main partners, just diversifying its partnerships. Sisi at this point was useful to Putin as a demonstration that Russia was not isolated by the Ukrainian crisis, but Moscow was under no illusions.²⁹⁴

However, there were reports around this time of possible Libyan purchases of Russian weapons through Egypt, though the financial details remained unclear.²⁹⁵ And in the case of anticipated Saudi payment for Russian weapons for Lebanon, Western sanctions on Russia for Ukraine were interfering, not Saudi pique at Moscow for its stance on Yemen.²⁹⁶ So, it was possible that Western sanctions on Russia were perhaps also a backstage impediment to Saudi payments for Russian weapons for Egypt.

Whatever was going on, in early March 2015, during the visit of Egyptian Minister of Defense and Military Production Sidqi Subhi Sayyid Ahmad to Moscow, he and Russian Defense Minister Shoygu presided over the signings of an intergovernmental protocol on military cooperation, a regulation on a joint Russian-Egyptian commission for military and technical cooperation, and a protocol of the first session of the joint Russian-Egyptian commission for military and

technical cooperation.²⁹⁷ The very next day, a Russian Defense Ministry official finally confirmed the beginning of fulfillment of a contract—said to have been signed “earlier”—for an unspecified number of Antey-2500 air defense systems, the export version of the S-300V4.²⁹⁸ And in late May, Russia and Egypt were reportedly on the verge of signing yet another new contract for 46 MiG-29 fighter aircraft, worth up to \$2 billion.²⁹⁹

All in all, Russia’s relations with Egypt were “absolutely wonderful,” as a long-time Middle East expert stated in May. When Putin visited in February, Sisi received him like a pharaoh. For the sake of bolstering his domestic legitimacy, President Sisi was playing up a Nasser-era image and the fight against the Muslim Brotherhood. In this context, positive relations with Russia were good for Sisi’s image. They played to the nostalgia in Egypt for the Nasser period.

The relationship is a “plus-plus” for Russia, observed a well-known “big picture” commentator in Moscow around the same time, and if the United States loses ground in Egypt, then this is “one more plus” for Russia. This does not mean Russian involvement in Egyptian foreign affairs. Nevertheless, despite internal weaknesses, this strategist’s view was that Egypt is still one of the more stable countries in the Middle East.³⁰⁰

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia was one of the 100 nations that voted against Russia on the March 2014 UNGA resolution. Nevertheless, on the leadership level, relations between Moscow and Riyadh would develop in 2014 and into 2015 despite the Ukrainian crisis, despite their continued opposing views on Syria, new tensions over the Saudi-led campaign against Houthi rebels in Yemen, the increasing prospects of a P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran, and the royal succession in Riyadh.

Ties between Saudi Arabia and Russia had been through some hard bumps, but since summer 2013, a desire on both sides to keep in touch has prevailed at the top. Moreover, in this context of revived contacts despite mutual wariness, the curious triangular relationship of likely Saudi funding for Egyptian arms purchases from Russia suggested to one Moscow expert that Egypt might prove to be the bridge to better relations between Moscow and Riyadh.³⁰¹

Riyadh’s confidence in Washington had been shaken by President Obama’s decision in January–February 2011 to withdraw support from Egyptian leader Mubarak, which opened the door to the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood, long a bête-noire of Saudi leaders. Nevertheless, although the impetus for revitalized Russian-Saudi contacts is a matter of speculation, a more likely suspect was mutual concern 2 years later over a potential rapprochement between Washington and Tehran.

The two adversaries had begun secret contacts in spring 2013. Deputy Secretary of State William Burns and Vice President Joseph Biden's top foreign policy advisor, Jake Sullivan, had begun to meet with Iranian officials in Muscat, Oman. The first discussion was in March, followed by two sessions in August and two more in October. These contacts paved the way for the P5+1 interim agreement with Iran on November 24, 2013, in Geneva, on the way forward toward a comprehensive resolution of the nuclear issue.³⁰²

The pace of contacts between Riyadh and Moscow quickened in June 2013. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal was in Moscow at the beginning of the month, and Lavrov reciprocated on June 21 after a phone call between Putin and King Abdullah. After his meetings in Jeddah, Lavrov said that all of his “conversation partners [had] underlined the profound interest of the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the King personally, who has just returned from his vacation, in the significant build-up of a partnership with the Russian Federation.”³⁰³ As already recounted, Putin and Prince Bandar then met in late June in Sochi.

Although not publicly stated, Russia and Saudi Arabia both appeared to be reacting to a perceived and feared potential U.S.-Iranian rapprochement that would gain strength after sanctions on Iran were lifted following a P5+1 comprehensive agreement limiting Iran's nuclear program. The thinking in Moscow and perhaps in some quarters of Riyadh seemed to be that any growing American-Iranian axis would be counterbalanced by a new Russian-Saudi axis—something truly new.³⁰⁴

Russia did not want a more dominant let alone nuclear-armed Iran because of Russia's other commitments in the region to Sunni Arabs and to Israel alike. In February 2012, for example, even as Russia was resisting Arab pressure over Syria, Putin was sensitive to Arab concerns over the Iranian nuclear program: “The Arab world is highly skeptical about the prospect of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. The Arab world categorically objects, and the best proof of that is the way the Arab world perceives the events in Syria.”³⁰⁵ And in his April 17, 2014, televised call-in session, Putin referred to “our Saudi friends,” and the “very friendly relations” that had developed despite differences.³⁰⁶

Consequently, Putin appeared to begin to double-track Russian policy. He would try to nail down Russian business positions in Iran before any U.S. arrival that might develop, while also courting Saudi Arabia. These more frequent contacts with Saudi Arabia would have several goals: as an incentive to Iran to react positively to Russian business and other approaches, and as a fallback should Iran go forward with the United States and relegate Russia to secondary status after a nuclear deal. Russia would continue to appreciate Iran as a “natural barrier” to

Saudi-sponsored Islamic extremism, but with a growing appreciation for the possibility of a new Russian-Saudi axis as a counterbalance to a potential new Iran-U.S. axis.

By summer 2014, Russian analysts placed greatest weight for the continuation of Russian-Saudi contacts on regional unhappiness over the slow response of the United States to the rise of ISIS. Perhaps the best plugged-in Russian expert on the Middle East was of the view that the prospects for Russia's relations with Saudi Arabia were bright despite differences over Syria.³⁰⁷ Shifts were underway in Saudi Arabia's policies, he opined. Syria was a mess. Saudi Arabia would likely fund Egyptian arms purchases from Russia. There was an uneasy transition in the Saudi royal family.³⁰⁸ There was disagreement with the United States on policy in Syria and toward Iran. All of these factors and developments were pushing Saudi Arabia toward unexpected moves.³⁰⁹ Saudi Arabia was vulnerable, thought this eminent Russian expert, and did not want Middle East issues to damage Saudi relations with Russia.³¹⁰

Echoing these thoughts, another Russian observer argued that Russia-Saudi relations were not strained. Both sides were looking for common ground. Also, Russian diplomats were now more optimistic about cooperation with Saudi Arabia in Egypt. The Saudis were desperate to stabilize the Middle East region and bring it under control. They had lost control of their ISIS project and were thus ready to cooperate with any country—even Iran or Russia—that could be helpful and that could provide weapons to the Iraqi government to fight ISIS. Nevertheless, it was hard to forecast developments in relations with Saudi Arabia because of the unsettled leadership questions there. Russia was also waiting for the Saudis to sort out their relations with Iran and Qatar.³¹¹

A third expert was of the opinion in summer 2014 that, while there were no real prospects, Saudi-Russian rapprochement was continuing. This was a paradox because it was not a rapprochement among friends. But there was a weakening of traditional alliances as a result of the policies of Obama, who was focused on domestic politics and unfocused on foreign policy. If America had been firm abroad, Saudi Arabia would not be interested in gestures toward Russia. But American weakness required the Saudis to look for other support bases, even among unfriendly powers. Saudi Arabia did not care about Ukraine. Although it was concerned by the challenge to the rights of Crimean Tatars, it saw a strong Putin, and it respected strength.³¹²

By September, however, this same expert thought that Obama's August authorization of limited airstrikes against ISIS might give Saudi Arabia and other Arab governments pause in their exploration of closer relations with Russia. The anti-Asad coalition had tied all the problems encountered from September 2013 to September 2014 to Obama's weakness, which had led to Asad being able to prevail on the ground. The coalition had been irritated with Obama

and therefore reenergized ties with Russia. Now, however, Obama had come back to the idea of material support to the Syrian opposition. Would this cause the Arab regional powers to reject the idea of Russia as an alternative power center in the region? So far there were more questions than answers, thought this expert.³¹³

Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal returned to Moscow for extensive talks with Lavrov in November. According to the Russian foreign minister, they covered the “colossal threat” from ISIS; the situation in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen; Iran’s nuclear program; the Palestinian-Israeli peace process; cooperation in energy, including the oil markets and nuclear energy; and other economic, transport, and space cooperation. In addition, Lavrov stated, “We have agreed to step up our joint efforts in combating terrorism and to this end form a bilateral working team.”³¹⁴

This mention of cooperation against terrorism was a variation on the theme rumored after Prince Bandar had seen Putin in early November 2013—that Riyadh had agreed to set up an intelligence office in Moscow to help Russia track extremist Chechens.³¹⁵ This time, however, in November 2014, there was no reported or rumored discussion of arms sales, whether Saudi purchases of Russian weapons for Saudi Arabia or financing of Egyptian purchases of Russian weapons. But that subject, of course, would have been more appropriate for talks between defense ministers rather than foreign ministers.

Meanwhile, Putin did not seem to give much currency to speculation that the drastic drop in world oil prices was the result of U.S.-Saudi collusion against Russia and Iran. In his November TASS interview, while not totally dismissing the conspiracy theorists, he put primary weight on the “fundamental factors” of increased supply and decreased demand.³¹⁶ A month later, at his 3-hour news conference, Putin again sat on the fence on the issue of possible Saudi-American collusion. “Maybe, but then maybe not,” he said. “Maybe it is a battle between the producers of traditional energy resources and shale oil.”³¹⁷

King Abdullah passed away on January 23, 2015, and was quickly succeeded by King Salman.³¹⁸ Since then, Saudi-Russian relations have so far come through the royal succession far better than might be expected, especially given the emotional issues that might push the two countries further apart. Ties are far from intimate, but all the same the leaderships on both sides seem to be making a concerted effort to communicate.

In the midst of the royal transition, the two countries held antiterrorist consultations in Riyadh on January 19. This was a followup to the agreement Foreign Ministers Lavrov and Prince Saud had reached in Moscow on November 21 to form a bilateral working group on fighting terrorism.³¹⁹ Prince Saud continued as foreign minister under King Salman. Interior Minister

Prince Mohammed bin Nayef not only continued as interior minister after the royal succession, but was also designated deputy crown prince, second in line to the throne after Crown Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.³²⁰

Although he was believed to be highly regarded in Washington and other capitals,³²¹ Prince Mohammed was presumably among those who signed off on the antiterrorism initiative with Russia. (In Moscow, however, he was not widely known, even after the royal succession.) Regional experts regarded him as pragmatic in the Saudi context. Was he “Washington’s best friend”? Professional Middle East watchers warned not to personify Saudi policy. Yes, observed an expert on Saudi Arabia, Prince Mohammed was recognized in Moscow as friendly toward the United States. This same expert, however, stressed that Prince Mohammed, above all else, was a Saudi patriot.³²²

In any event, Crown Prince Muqrin conferred with Russian Ambassador Oleg Ozerov in February.³²³ In March, Foreign Minister Prince Saud consulted by telephone with Lavrov on Yemen and also kept alive the prospects for bilateral energy and economic cooperation.³²⁴ Saudi Arabia launched its first airstrikes in Yemen as Houthi rebels advanced toward Aden on March 26, 2015. Within hours, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement calling for all parties in Yemen “and their external allies immediately [to] cease any forms of warfare and give up attempts to achieve their goals through military force.”³²⁵

Russian media commentators were decidedly negative about the chances for success of the Saudi and Arab League military campaign in Yemen.³²⁶ Some even called for Russia to help the Houthi rebels bring about regime change in Saudi Arabia.³²⁷ All the same, at the top there continued a steady stream of consultations between Moscow and Riyadh. On March 28, Defense Minister Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, son of King Salman and the public point person for the Saudi campaign in Yemen, met with Ambassador Ozerov to discuss the unfolding developments.³²⁸ He received him again on April 15.³²⁹

In late March, to the obvious dismay of his Egyptian hosts,³³⁰ Prince Saud made headlines when he publicly lashed out at a message from Putin to the Arab League summit in Sharm al-Shaykh that called for an end to hostilities in Yemen.³³¹ Several times during the following week, Lavrov pressed the call for a UNSC resolution pushing all sides toward a cessation of hostilities and the beginning of negotiations toward a political solution to the Yemeni conflict.³³² All the same, it was Prince Saud who placed the call to Lavrov on April 6 to discuss the Yemen conflict and coordinate the evacuation of Russian and other citizens from that country.³³³ In an interview around this time, Lavrov referred to Russia’s Saudi “colleagues” and asserted, “we really value our relations with Saudi Arabia and other participants of the coalition.”³³⁴

Putin's April 13 S-300 decision painted Russia ever more solidly in regional perceptions as pro-Shia and pro-Iran. Nevertheless, despite Saudi dismay, it was none other than newly crowned King Salman who on April 20 placed the call to Putin to discuss—according to the Russian account of the conversation—enhancing mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation. King Salman reportedly “praised” Russia’s abstention on April 14 in the UN Security Council vote to adopt Resolution 2216 addressing the Yemen crisis.³³⁵ Putin in return invited the new Saudi leader to visit Russia.³³⁶ The next day, Riyadh announced a shift into lower gear on its aerial bombardment campaign against Houthi targets in Yemen.³³⁷

A surprising second round in the royal succession followed a few days later. In decrees read over Saudi TV at dawn on April 29, King Salman announced that Prince Mohammed bin Nayef would replace Muqrin as Crown Prince, and that Defense Minister Prince Mohammed bin Salman would be the new deputy crown prince. Should Crown Prince Mohammed eventually actually replace Salman as king, he would be the first grandson rather than son of the kingdom’s founder, King Abdulaziz, to rise to the top. Another indicator of likely generational change was the designation of Prince Mohammed bin Salman, King Salman’s young son and defense minister, as deputy crown prince. In addition, long-time Saudi ambassador to Washington Adel al-Jubeir would replace Prince Saud as foreign minister.³³⁸

In Moscow, analysts saw especially this second round of succession changes as evidence that the new leadership in Riyadh had strong ties to the United States and was eager to show its support. Nevertheless, Russia’s stock in Riyadh was high at the moment as the Saudis remained on the hunt for new partners to lessen their reliance on the United States.³³⁹ Yes, direct arms sales were no longer part of the equation and Russia’s relationship with Saudi Arabia remained difficult. Yes, there continued to be genuine Russian mistrust of the Saudis, and Moscow remained focused on the Wahabi threat to the Russian homeland. All the same, Moscow clearly retained entrée to the top Saudi leadership.³⁴⁰

When Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov visited Saudi Arabia just a month after King Salman’s decrees amending the royal succession, he was received by King Salman, Crown Prince Mohammed, and Foreign Minister Jubeir.³⁴¹ In a lengthy interview not long before Bogdanov’s visit, the newly appointed Saudi ambassador to Russia was remarkably upbeat on the prospects for developing relations.³⁴² And it was no wonder. In a visit that took many observers by surprise, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman soon met with Putin in St. Petersburg on June 18.³⁴³ Such contacts seemed to confirm continued efforts on both sides to nurture relations and dialogue, notwithstanding deep societal mistrust of one another.

All in all, given the general perception of declining American focus on and strength in the region, friction between Moscow and Washington meant more room for maneuver for countries in the Middle East. Even if they still recognized that the United States remained the most formidable power in the region, they all had little incentive to spite Russia over Ukraine. They continued to be interested in engaging at least superficially and formally with Russia in order to use it as a token, yet still potentially useful counter-lever or balancer to the United States. They did not want to join Russia against the West. They wanted instead to take advantage of both Russia and the West as they tilted against each other over Ukraine.³⁴⁴

Countries in the Middle East therefore all continued their cordial contacts with Moscow. Russia may have been dropped from the G-8 in March 2014,³⁴⁵ but Putin used travel and meetings with other counterparts, including in the Middle East, to demonstrate that Russia was not isolated internationally. Both before and after the shock of the shooting down of MH 17 in July, states like Egypt pursued closer relations with Russia, using the acrimonious dispute between Russia and the United States for leverage in Washington. Putin in turn used his continued welcome in the Middle East to soften the blowback against Russia from the West.

As one expert in Moscow in June 2014 summed up the situation after Crimea, the main impact of the Ukrainian crisis was an improvement of Russia's image in the Middle East. It showed Russian strength, and that was important for the Arabs. At the Russian Foreign Ministry, this expert reported, officials were claiming that Russia was getting more respect in the Middle East and was being treated as a serious player. The perception in Moscow was that there was understanding among Arab intellectuals that Russia could not have behaved any other way. They agreed that Russia's interests were threatened in Ukraine, Russia had to act, and Russia's annexation of Crimea was fine.³⁴⁶

In September 2014, after the downing of MH 17, another expert on the region offered some additional nuances. This expert, fluent in Arabic and interacting frequently with Arabs over the years, noted that Arabs had been shocked by Crimea. They were trying to stay neutral. However, not one Arab with whom this expert had met had criticized Russia. When Palestinian and Egyptian delegations had recently been in Moscow, they had all claimed to be happy with what Russia had done in Ukraine. They had claimed to welcome the return to the region of a strong Russia and to be tired of U.S. hegemony. However, this expert thought that such lack of criticism was disingenuous. While using the issue to set a good atmosphere for their visits to Moscow, these Arabs actually still regarded the United States as more important than Russia. Representatives from the Gulf, however, were being more careful. They said they were neutral, that they were trying to have good relations with the United States, Russia, and Ukraine.

As for Israel, observed this same expert before Putin's April 2015 S-300 surprise, its situation was more complicated than that of the Arabs. It was difficult to do business in Ukraine, which was more corrupt even than Russia, yet the Israelis had still managed to do some business there, so they had some economic equities in Ukraine. Yes, Russian propaganda charges of anti-Semitism in Ukraine may have had Israel as one of several audiences, but in fact there really was anti-Semitism in Ukraine.³⁴⁷ The Ukrainian "Right Sector" was anti-Russian and frequently anti-Semitic. Because of this, the Israelis could not support what was happening in Ukraine and they did not want to criticize Russia over its actions in Ukraine. This lack of Israeli criticism of Russian policy in Ukraine had helped Israel. Russia in return was not overly critical of Israel over the Gaza war. Russia appreciated Israel's position on Ukraine, so Russia in return did not involve itself in Israel's Gaza affair.³⁴⁸

If we put aside the votes on the March 27, 2014, UN General Assembly resolution on the annexation of Crimea, no country in the wider Middle East—except Turkey—behaved in any way as though it had a dog in the East-West fight over Ukraine. All countries in the Middle East, even Turkey and Israel, appeared determined that Ukraine not spoil their overall relations with Russia. Some, most notably Egypt, even seemed to welcome the return of something akin to the old Cold War of the Soviet era.³⁴⁹

After the annexation of Crimea, some expert observers in Moscow suggested that Syria had lost its importance to Putin as a venue for bolstering his ratings at home by posing as a champion for a great and independent Russia standing up to America because his Ukrainian gambit was now doing this much more effectively.³⁵⁰ The Middle East, however, including Syria, had now acquired another important function: to demonstrate that Russia was not an international pariah. After the downing of MH 17 and the more open Russian military intervention in southeastern Ukraine in August, Putin was using his contacts in the Middle East not only to help him soften the impact of Western economic sanctions, but especially to avoid international isolation.

For reasons varying from country to country, Russia's revived presence in the Middle East was successfully passing the major international stress test posed by the Ukrainian crisis. Leaders in the region were happy to oblige Putin in pursuit of their own goals. These included trade, investment, and arms deals with Russia. Their goals also included sending messages to the United States through contacts with Russia not to take them for granted and not to demand too much in the way of changing their policies, especially on human rights and domestic governance. But, with the exception of Syria's Asad, none seemed ready or anxious to oblige Russia

to the point that closer contacts with Russia might spoil the prospects of gains for themselves pursuant to better relations or closer contacts with the United States.

Back to the Future?

Toward the end of April 2015, Vitaly Naumkin, director of Moscow's Institute of Oriental Studies, marveled at all the evidence of "vibrant" Russian activism in the Middle East in that month alone. He had just finished moderating a second round of inter-Syrian talks in Moscow. Russia was an active party in the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program that had produced the Lausanne framework agreement. Putin had made headlines with his decision to allow the once embargoed transfer of S-300 air defense systems to Iran.

Naumkin's list did not stop with Syria and Iran. Arab capitals had expressed "gratitude" to Russia's leadership for not vetoing the UN Security Council resolution on Yemen. Libyan Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thinni had again been in Moscow lobbying for the restoration of old arms contracts—Russia is eager to do so once UN Security Council sanctions are lifted—and other agreements on building a railway and exploring energy resources. And Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas also visited Moscow in April, and there were hints that Russia intended to become more active in the Middle East peace process.³⁵¹

Similarly, commenting on Putin's S-300 decision, Dmitri Trenin, head of the Moscow office of the Carnegie Institute, observed that with the flare-up of East-West tensions over Ukraine, "the Russian leadership has redefined its country as a non-Western power in search of new openings, and a new world order. Toward that goal, Russia has been expanding and deepening connections with major countries such as Iran." Going back further, since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, "Syria has become a symbol of Russian reentry into the Middle East; Egypt, of Moscow's hope for rekindling some old ties; and Turkey, of a new type of energy relations with the European Union." Iran could now give Russia "strategic depth," Trenin argued, if Moscow could avoid being sucked in to "increasingly complicated regional rivalries."³⁵²

Lots of Flirting, But Still Not a Top Priority

Despite all the signs of success for Putin's policy of using the Middle East to demonstrate that Russia is not isolated as a result of the Ukrainian crisis, few in Moscow are under any illusions. Over the past year, experts on the region have observed and sometimes lamented to me that Russia has been "flirting" with Iran, and with others in the region, and this flirting has been useful all around. But, as one expert with direct hands-on press and academic experience dealing with the region put it, it is a sorrowful situation. Russia has no real allies that share its

views. Russia has partners, but they are all exploiting the relationships that Russia needs, and Russia has to pay for the privilege.³⁵³

As this same observer evaluates the situation: Russian policy is now totally pragmatic. Russia wants to have good relations with all countries in the region. It is ready to sell arms to all, trade with all, have investments with all. However, Russia insists to all: don't send your money to support extremists and separatists in Russia's north Caucasus—and Russia will keep out of your politics.³⁵⁴

Russia is still valued by governments in the region as a source for weapons and for "legal" support through its veto power in the UNSC, this expert continues. These are serious factors, especially for Syria. The Middle East still sees Russia as a counterweight to the United States. Russia has shown that it is a great power that is willing and able to challenge the United States to protect Russia's national interests. In fact, the Ukrainian crisis has actually helped Russia improve its standing in the Middle East. That is why Egypt has been willing to return to its previous "Cold War game." These themes would continue to reverberate in conversations I had well into 2015.³⁵⁵

While not disagreeing with this overall assessment, another expert with Arabic language skills judges that the Middle East—in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis—is now nevertheless less important for Russia. Russia's involvement in Ukraine has brought with it a lessening of interest in the Middle East. For state radio and TV propaganda, for example, the Middle East is a good point of departure for criticism of the United States and Obama. But there is little that is "real" in this. When this expert gets calls from state entities, it is now only for propaganda purposes. It is not, for example, for translations to support real business interests or concrete government programs. For Middle East watchers, thinks this expert, the Ukrainian crisis is making it harder to be professionally active in the region.³⁵⁶

Indeed, when Putin addressed Russian diplomats in early July 2014, he devoted only one glancing, catch-all sentence to the Middle East: "All of us in Europe need a sort of safety net to make sure that Iraqi, Libyan or Syrian—and unfortunately, I have to say also Ukrainian—precedents do not become contagious." Apart from this, Putin made no reference at all in this speech to the Middle East as a region or to any individual countries in the region. The address to Russia's top diplomats is an event that takes place every 2 years, and this was even less than Putin had said about the region in July 2012. Ukraine had become the commanding issue of the day, and dealing with the fallout of Ukraine in the Commonwealth of Independent States, in Europe, and with the United States had clearly become Russia's number one diplomatic priority—not the Middle East.³⁵⁷

A year later, evidence continues to mount that the Middle East is still not a top priority for Moscow. More than ever, countries like China and India far outrank the Middle East as Russian global geopolitical priorities. The press in Cairo, for example, made much of President Sisi's visit to Moscow for the May 9, 2015, celebrations of the 70th anniversary of VE Day.³⁵⁸ Sisi, to be sure, met with Putin in the Kremlin prior to the Red Square parade.³⁵⁹ At the parade itself, however, it was China and India that got star billing. Putting an exclamation mark to a year that had seen accelerated development of ties between Moscow and Beijing—the pace of which impressed even seasoned Moscow observers of their own country's diplomacy—it was Chinese President Xi Jinping who sat next to Putin throughout the parade.³⁶⁰

Then came not Sisi but Indian President Shri Pranab Mukherjee, just down from Xi. Sisi, in fact, barely made it into video coverage of the event, with even Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe sitting closer to Putin and thus outranking Sisi in the seating protocol.³⁶¹ At the same time, reinforcing the impression of Egypt's modest importance to Moscow at the VE Day anniversary celebrations, Sisi's presence went almost unremarked on by the Russian media and leadership. Foreign Minister Lavrov, for example, did not even mention Egypt or Sisi in his remarks at the May 9 events.³⁶²

The Middle East was not just a secondary priority in Russian global policy. However disruptive in Ukraine, that policy was also conservative and not activist in the Middle East, opined a veteran analyst of the region in summer 2014. This was good, because no one could do much to solve the problems of the Middle East. There were no possibilities for a more active Russian policy in the region. There were many problems and no solutions. Everyone understood this, even the United States. Russia was not conducting a "spoiler" policy in the region, this analyst half-joked a year later; after all, there is so little left to spoil.

Russia dealt with what it faced in the region, this expert emphasized. If the Muslim Brotherhood was in power in Egypt, Russia dealt with it. If Sisi was in power in Cairo, Russia dealt with him. Whatever was there, Russia dealt with it. And this was the correct policy. Even if one regarded Sisi as not legitimate, one had to deal with him eventually, so it was better to deal with him sooner rather than later.³⁶³

Overall, as an expert with journalistic and academic experience in the region observed, Middle East countries were quite comfortable with the return of East-West confrontation. They could now once again milk both sides, except that they were now finding a big difference compared to the Soviet period. This time around, they had to pay for weapons from Russia.

This expert had just written an article for a Middle Eastern publication in which he crunched the figures on how much the Soviet Union during the Cold War had given away in

relieving debt for purchases of weapons and other aid. In the piece, he had warned that there would be no more free lunches from Russia. He had also explained the reality that Israel was more valuable to Russia than the Arab states as a source of technology and investments, and for Israel's ability to influence the United States politically.³⁶⁴

True to form, Russia seemed quite happy to sit on the sidelines and earn cash by selling fighter planes and other weapons to Iraq while the Obama administration was in the early stages of grappling with the new ISIS threat. This actually reflected traditional Russian behavior and the low capabilities and capacities to act in the Middle East, which Russian analysts had underscored before Putin's defense of Syria's Assad began to get some traction in fall 2012, well before the Ukrainian crisis hit. This was typical Russian behavior. Other than selling more weapons, Russia's response in the region to the rising ISIS threat was likely to be limited and not serious, opined a veteran Russian student of the region.³⁶⁵

In many respects, it could be argued, the process of defining Russian economic interests in the Middle East under Putin bore a broad similarity—but with a crucial difference—to what had obtained during the Yeltsin period. Then, as veteran Washington analyst Eugene Rumer described it, “With the exception of weapons-related trade and the notable case of Russian nuclear cooperation with Iran, the region has been of little commercial interest to Russia.” Furthermore, “powerful corporate and bureaucratic clans” pursued their interests “virtually independently” and “without regard for the public good or the national interest,” resulting in “multiple foreign policies—in the Middle East and elsewhere.”³⁶⁶

A free-for-all was still taking place, but only Putin associates were allowed to participate. As Moscow pundit Tatyana Stanovaya put it, “the fight for markets (in the geopolitical, economic and energy senses) and the maximization of profit alongside the minimization of risks [by] the major state corporations and the private corporations controlled by Putin’s friends” determined the course of Russia’s domestic and foreign policy.³⁶⁷

Mediterranean Expansion—Without Full-Service Bases

The Ukrainian crisis brought with it strategic implications for the allocation of Russian resources, including in the Middle East. As the Moscow pundit/scholar noted, Russia on the one hand will have to redirect some resources to the Crimea that it might otherwise have invested in the Middle East or elsewhere. Nevertheless, with reinforcement of the Black Sea Fleet based at Sevastopol, Russia eventually will be able to deploy more forces to the Mediterranean.³⁶⁸ One result will be the displacement of Turkey as the Black Sea’s number one naval power in the post-Soviet era.³⁶⁹

However, Western opposition and Russian economic weakness will impose limits on Russia's muscle-flexing in the Middle East. Foreign Minister Lavrov in November 2013, as seen, had reacted skittishly to the suggestion that Russia might reestablish a naval base at Alexandria in Egypt. According to one expert, "It is entirely unlikely . . . that Russia is actually seeking to establish a proper naval base in one of the Mediterranean ports." Moreover, "the United States and the West have ample political instruments to stymie any Russian attempts to set up even a small naval supply station in almost every single country of the Mediterranean, with the exception of Syria."³⁷⁰

And even in Syria, observed several experts with experience in the region, Tartus, while a prestige symbol, was militarily useless. As one noted, it did not allow the Russian fleet to counter the U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean.³⁷¹ This was the case before the Ukrainian crisis began, but now even more so given the paradigm shift in relations with the United States and the West brought about by that crisis. Russian force projection into the Mediterranean on the basis of a revitalized Sevastopol naval base will be a long-term process. However, Asad's recent enthusiasm for the expansion of Russian presence at Tartus evoked little public gusto in Moscow.³⁷²

A well-known analyst with a military background recently noted that Moscow is clearly interested in again becoming a prominent presence in the eastern Mediterranean. But Russia is nowhere near even the first steps toward expanding its naval presence in the region to that degree. In the meantime, Syria's Tartus is not the best facility to rely on. Russia instead is courting Cyprus; Egypt is also potentially important.

Russia, however, does not need U.S.-style bases, this expert continued; lighter facilities would be sufficient. The USSR maintained a squadron in the Mediterranean without any major naval bases. During the Nasser era, Alexandria was not a U.S.-style, full-service naval base; it was only for refueling and resupplying ships. Russia may therefore seek rights to access and use facilities in the Mediterranean, but not acquire actual naval bases. Additionally, there is the important question of money. Bases cost a great deal of money; Russia will instead invest in facilities in Russia itself. The distance from Sevastopol to the eastern Mediterranean, after all, is not that great.³⁷³

All the same, Russia is already using joint military exercises in the Mediterranean to signal its continuing presence and advertise its warming relations with China and Egypt. Russian and Chinese ships held "Joint Sea/Naval Interaction–2015" drills from May 11–21, the fourth such exercises since 2012 but the first in the Mediterranean.³⁷⁴ Russian and Egyptian ships held their first-ever joint exercise, "Friendship Bridge–2015," off the Egyptian port of Alexandria, where the Russian ships anchored, from June 6–14.³⁷⁵

Analysts in Moscow saw the exercises with China as a smart move. Both countries were concerned by developments in the Middle East and eventually would have to deal with instability in the region. In the meantime, the exercises were a political message to Washington, the only addressee. This made sense for Russia. It sent the message, “We are not alone. Our association with China is increasingly close.” This was an obvious hint to the United States: “If you do not deal with us, we will have to find other partners.” It was actually a bolder move for the Chinese to associate themselves with Russia in this way. Lastly, the sea drills were also inexpensive: they cost each navy, which must train anyway, only a few tons of diesel fuel.³⁷⁶

Mark Galeotti, a long-time student of Russian domestic and foreign policy, has cautioned that “Russia’s current influence reflects a very efficient use of what meager assets it has, rather than any real strength in depth.” Some perspective is necessary. Russia’s current successes in the region “should not obscure the fact that the West has vastly greater military, political and economic resources. It is currently simply unable or unwilling to deploy them effectively.”³⁷⁷

The ISIS Threat to Russia

In the shorter term, the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq is posing an immediate threat to Russian interests. Regional observers in Moscow agree that the ISIS threat to the region as well as to Russia will last years, and that Russia should cooperate with the West against ISIS. By fall 2014, long-time observers of Muslim communities across Russia were concluding that many Russian Muslims—predominantly Sunni—were not happy with Russian policy toward Alevi-dominated Syria, Shia-governed Iran, and Russia’s own Muslim regions. By spring 2015, some warned that ISIS posed a political threat to Russia because its tactics threatened to drive a wedge between Russia’s Muslim and Slavic populations.³⁷⁸

One Moscow observer argued that the Muslim Brotherhood was more popular than ISIS, but that ISIS was also feared. ISIS was certainly a threat to Russia, as well as a common threat to Russia and the United States. This expert recalled that in June 2006 a gang abducted half-a-dozen employees of the Russian embassy in Baghdad. Several were shot dead. At least one was beheaded. The perpetrators reportedly claimed their attack was against Russian policy in Chechnya.³⁷⁹

Another expert observed that many in Dagestan, Chechnya, and the Tatar Republic “loved” the Islamic State. They respected—*uvazhayut*—ISIS, especially after the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood and President Morsi in Egypt. Many in Russia’s heavily Muslim regions saw another victory for Islam in the successes of the Islamic State. They thought it good if ISIS punished the United States. And if the Islamic State attacked Putin, their view was that that it

would be all the better. So, the coalition being put together by the United States might kill ISIS as an organization, but the movement would remain and there would be those who wanted revenge.³⁸⁰

The terrorist attack on the Chechen capital of Grozny on December 4 was a worrisome reminder of the region's vulnerability, even if Chechen militants and not ISIS apparently carried out the attack.³⁸¹ At a conference in Moscow just weeks before, experts put the number of Russian citizens fighting for ISIS at 2,000, or up to 10 percent of ISIS's total estimated force of 20,000 to 30,000. The experts at this conference debated whether these fighters would return to Russia to fight once finished with their battles in Syria and Iraq. Aleksey Malashenko, a well-known authority on the subject, thought that most would return and present a significant if perhaps deferred threat.³⁸²

However, ISIS is also presenting Russia with an opportunity to deflect Western and regional pressure against the Asad regime in Damascus. Moscow argues that the fight against ISIS should be a much higher priority, and that the Asad regime's opponents should join with it in making common cause against ISIS. This boon of sorts for Russia is magnified by the discord among Asad's opponents over which should be the priority target: the Asad regime or ISIS.

At the same time, Russian experts on the region have pointed out that if Western forces strike Syrian government forces, Russia would have an obligation to support Damascus.³⁸³ Conversely, Russia's explicit official stance has been that it will not join any anti-ISIS coalition military efforts unless the UN Security Council supports them.³⁸⁴ Implicitly, however, Russia has not moved to oppose U.S.-led anti-ISIS military strikes that steered well clear of Damascus forces.

To date, Russia has been lucky and has benefited from the West's intervention fatigue. But all along, some Russian observers have claimed, Moscow's approach to the Middle East has been mostly tactical and reactive, although it has been guided by several strategic biases. These have included the view that democracy in the Middle East simply opens the door to nondemocratic, extremist Islamist regimes, and that the Middle East is more a source of threats to Russia than must be neutralized than a region in which to nurture positive relations and advantages.

Russia's UN Security Council Veto Entitlement

Looking into the future, we should not overrate Russia's aspirations or capacity to have its way in the region. Few in Moscow expect that the Middle East on its own merits will remain a top priority for Russian diplomacy in the years to come.³⁸⁵ At the same time, one major structural entitlement will continue to yield dividends for Russia in its campaign to level the playing field with the United States and Europe in the Middle East: UN Security Council veto power.³⁸⁶

This will continue to contribute to Russia's campaign to reassert what it portrays as the post–World War II agreed rules of the game, in particular the supremacy of the UN Charter and the UN Security Council in sanctioning the international community's use of force.³⁸⁷ Russia's embrace of these principles has been undercut by its military intervention in Ukraine. Nevertheless, Russia's UN Security Council veto power will allow it to stay active in the Middle East. Even before the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, one analyst suggested with a smile that Russia and America should consider "peaceful coexistence" in the region.³⁸⁸

But while Russia has the veto, it has little confidence that the United States and its allies will respect Moscow's use of the veto. In 2003, the United States had bent the interpretation of the UNSC-approved Iraq resolution to invade that country. After that, Russia had negotiated hard to make sure the 2006–2010 series of UNSC resolutions on the Iran nuclear file were based on a high barrier to the use of force.³⁸⁹ All the same, in October–November 2011, Moscow worried that the United States and Israel were ready to bomb Iran anyway. And in August–September 2013, Moscow and the world believed the United States was ready to launch a military strike without UNSC authorization against the Damascus regime over its use of chemical weapons.

But so what if Russia's veto power is not fireproof and does not have a broad economic presence or interests across the region and the world? For rulers like Asad, that may be more than enough, especially when Russia has the political will to flex the muscles it does have while major Western powers do not.

All that Asad wants is specific, timely, and effective military-diplomatic help. It is true that Russia does not have a navy capable of warfighting in the Mediterranean. But as the Syrian Express has demonstrated, Russia does have enough of a navy to deliver to Syria critical arms, ammunition, and spare parts, so far unencumbered by a U.S.-NATO arms embargo enforced by interdiction. Moreover, Moscow can do this mostly from military reserve stocks, thus putting little strain on its weapons industry.³⁹⁰

Uncertain Refuge During Ukrainian Storm

Russia has indeed been punching above its weight in the Middle East for the past several years,³⁹¹ but the region still is not a top priority for Russia. However, relations with the United States, Canada, the EU states, Japan, and Australia continue to founder over Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in the Donbas. On the first anniversary of the start of the Maydan protests in Kyiv, the pundit Tatyana Stanovaya rated Putin's Ukraine policy as Russia's "largest geopolitical defeat."³⁹²

There has been a sobering trend line even in Internet humor. In the triumphal early weeks after the annexation of Crimea, one entry crowed that “Russia’s introduction of troops into Crimea violated the most important norm of contemporary international law: only America has the right to employ force!”³⁹³ By November 2014, an entry markedly different in tone noted ironically that “A book has been published with a complete list of countries that do not love Russia. Its title is *The Great World Atlas*.³⁹⁴

This is hyperbole, of course. Russia is not isolated in the world, however unwelcome Putin is in those countries that have sanctioned Russia over its Ukraine actions. On this count, there was a glimmer of optimism that the worst in relations with the West might be past when U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry met with Putin and Lavrov in Sochi on May 12.³⁹⁵ Not long afterward, a lifelong student of the Middle East joked that God had sent the Middle East to Russia so that there would be one region in the world where other countries could cooperate with Russia when they were not cooperating elsewhere.³⁹⁶ However, any optimism likely dissipated with the decision of the G7, at its meeting in Krun, Germany, on June 7–8, to keep sanctions on Russia over Ukraine in place. In these circumstances, Russia’s more important partners will most certainly be BRICS members,³⁹⁷ China especially, and other major non-G7 economies that have not joined in the condemnation of Moscow over Crimea.

But the Russian economy is under strain. Sanctions have inflicted \$40 billion in losses, and the cost of the drop in world oil prices has been double that at \$90–\$100 billion. In addition, capital flight may reach \$128 billion in 2014. Perhaps even more worrisome, Russian companies owe Western banks nearly \$700 billion but are now cut off from access to refinancing to manage this debt.³⁹⁸ As a result, Russia’s gross domestic product could plummet by as much as 10 percent in 2015 according to the calculations of Anders Aslund,³⁹⁹ 7 percent according to the Gaidar Institute,⁴⁰⁰ 3.8 percent according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank,⁴⁰¹ and even 2.8 percent according to Economic Development Minister Alexei Ulyukayev.⁴⁰² Several years of stagnation will follow, with growth projections perhaps slightly positive and lucky to rise above zero.⁴⁰³

Increased trade with China, other BRICS countries, and G-20 countries not in the G7 cannot begin to offset such substantial damage to the Russian economy. However, Putin is taking a greater interest in them and the wider Middle East—and the impulse is being reciprocated in the latter region. President Erdogan hosted a “state visit” for Putin on December 1, during which Putin redirected the \$22 billion South Stream pipeline project from Europe to Turkey.⁴⁰⁴ On December 11, Putin was in India.⁴⁰⁵ And Russia will chair and host Shanghai Co-operation Organization and BRICS summits in Ufa in the Russian republic of Bashkortostan, this summer.⁴⁰⁶

Since the toppling of Libya's Qadhafi in 2011, Russia has gained from U.S. and Western missteps and innate Middle East complexities. Moscow's defense of Syria's Asad turned out to be a stepping stone to recovered prestige on the world stage and the tactical ability and confidence to annex Crimea. Had it not been for the MH 17 shootdown, Putin might have succeeded in preventing a united Western sanctions response and in getting away with this Ukrainian adventure relatively scot free. But the MH 17 tragedy and Russian semicovert military invasion of the Donbas undermined its gains and engendered tension and mistrust. Even Russia's Eurasian Economic Union partners Belarus and Kazakhstan have moved to put distance politically between themselves and Putin on the Ukrainian issue.⁴⁰⁷

However successful in recovering its footing in the Middle East, Russia faces ambiguity and uncertainty on many fronts in the region. Russia will be a key actor in negotiating any eventual outcome to the civil war in Syria, with or without Asad, but Iran will not want Russia to steal its leverage in Damascus and the Asad regime will be an obstreperous, demanding, and in many ways ungrateful partner to both Moscow and Tehran.⁴⁰⁸

Moscow hosted several rounds of inter-Syrian talks on January 26–29⁴⁰⁹ and April 6–9⁴¹⁰ that may have served as a bridge to an upcoming third round of Geneva talks chaired by the UN Secretary General's special envoy.⁴¹¹ But some have remarked on the lack of participation by serious elements of the real Syrian opposition, profound disagreements among those who have attended, the rigidness of Damascus representatives, Iranian unhappiness about the Russian initiative, and the faux nature of the entire enterprise.⁴¹² The strongest regime opponents did not attend, noted several Russian observers. For Putin, they asserted, it is not important to solve the Syrian problem, but only to keep up the appearance of a process: to demonstrate quasi-activity and Russia as a peacemaker.⁴¹³

However, the Moscow inter-Syrian talks have not been just a device to stall while keeping Asad in power, but also a device for Moscow to pursue its own interests in Syria vis-à-vis those of Iran—a long goal of Russia. This is another reason for Russia to keep in close touch with Saudi Arabia: to balance the appearance throughout the region that Moscow has cast its lot entirely with Iranian-led Shia forces across the Middle East. In Tehran, some still fantasize that Russia and Iran are “strategic partners.”⁴¹⁴ In Moscow, however, Foreign Ministry officials caution that Iran has “sharply increased” its influence in the Middle East and could become a “strategic partner” with the United States in the region.⁴¹⁵ Perhaps to slow down any trend in that direction, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, meeting recently with his Iranian counterpart Zarif, “welcomed” Iran’s hazy proposal for “strategic cooperation.”⁴¹⁶

Iran and Russia have had some overlapping interests in the region, but these have not erased enduring competition for global energy markets, particularly in Europe, and centuries of mistrust. These will spill over into the still-not-concluded P5+1 nuclear negotiations and even into the selection of an air defense system with which to implement Putin's decision to resurrect the old S-300 contract. In Iraq, Russia has profited from timely arms transfers and perseverance in protecting Lukoil's valuable energy investments, but its influence is overshadowed by that of Iran and even the United States. In Yemen, Russia has opposed the Saudi-led aerial bombardment campaign even while remaining on polite terms with Iran's nemesis.

Russia has steadfastly opposed the policies of Saudi Arabia and most of the Gulf states in Syria. The Saudis and the Qataris still insist that Asad must go. However, combatant and donor fatigue may be conducive to the ability of Moscow in the end to midwife an outcome suitable enough for Riyadh,⁴¹⁷ and Moscow is still playing up the need to deepen cooperation across the board with Saudi Arabia.⁴¹⁸ At the same time, Saudi determination to keep global oil prices low to discourage Russian and other nations' strategic investments that will eventually produce competing energy supplies is wreaking havoc with the Russian economy and undermining Moscow's potential to play the role of a great power anywhere beyond its immediate periphery.⁴¹⁹

Putin has done surprisingly well in Egypt and may even be working with Riyadh to finance Egyptian purchases of Russian arms. But Moscow seems to be aware that it needs to proceed cautiously in efforts to use Egypt for Russian force projection in the Middle East, given the reversals the Soviet Union suffered there during the Cold War.

With Israel, Russia reacted mildly to Israeli conduct in the recent Gaza war after Israel earlier did likewise to Russian actions in Crimea and southeastern Ukraine. Russia voted in favor of the UNSC draft resolution advancing Palestinian statehood, knowing that the measure would not pass and therefore not sour Moscow's relations with Israel. But Moscow will be leery of trying to ingratiate itself with the Arab street by supporting the Palestinian Authority's bid to join the International Criminal Court to press war crimes charges against Israel, or by seriously challenging U.S. leadership of the Israeli-Palestinian Mideast Quartet peace process. Moves in either direction would rock what have been stable and even warm relations between Moscow and Jerusalem.⁴²⁰

But Russia's warm ties with Israel are beginning to cost it dearly on the Arab street, if not among Arab leaderships in the region. According to one study, in June 2014, 42 percent of respondents from 15 Arab countries regarded Russian policy in the Middle East as negative. This reflected dislike of both Russia's support for Syria's Asad and its lack of support for

Egypt's by-then-ousted President Morsi and for the Palestinian cause. By October 2014, after the Gaza war, reflecting Russia's gentle handling of Israel's actions during that war, 59 percent viewed Russian policy in the region as negative.

Meanwhile, the overall negative attitude toward Russia has risen from 20 percent to 40 percent, and positive regard for Russia in general has dropped from 36 percent to 29 percent. Opinions toward the United States have been similarly negative, but the negatives that it took America over 30 years to gain Russia has gotten in only 2–3 years, according to polling project head Mohammad al-Masri.⁴²¹

Sunni Arabs in the Gulf states especially are enraged over Russia's continued support of Asad in Damascus. Moscow's constancy could serve it well should Asad survive, but will not reflect well on Russia in the region if Moscow's gamble does not pay off, as suggested to some by recent events. In April–May 2015, Syrian regime forces suffered a string of defeats, and there were also signs of significant discord within Asad's inner circle.⁴²² Reflecting on these events, the attitude in Moscow was that Asad has always been in trouble; Asad will still be in trouble in Damascus long after Obama leaves the White House; there is no realistic alternative to Asad to resist Sunni Islamist extremism, chaos, and fragmentation of Syria; and Russia should therefore continue to plod on in search of a political solution.⁴²³

The present return of Russia to the Middle East thus rests on uncertain currents and the politics of the moment rather than a strategic framework for the future. However, an American pivot away from energy dependence and wars in the Middle East toward the Asia-Pacific region and a Russian rebalance away from the West toward the East and Eurasia could portend at least a modest relative rise in Russia's presence and diplomatic activism in the Middle East.⁴²⁴ Besides, according to Foreign Minister Lavrov, countries in the region are growing tired of American "recipes" for solving their problems.⁴²⁵

Realism will restrain all sides from believing that Russia can ever become a real alternative to the United States in the Middle East, whatever the extent of the U.S. pivot toward the Asia-Pacific.⁴²⁶ Moreover, Moscow's regional experts see too many problems with no solutions in the Middle East. This suggests that Russia will be careful not to be drawn in too deeply into the region into issues where the prospects of successful outcomes are low.⁴²⁷

Nevertheless, while not setting the bar of expectations overly high, Putin appears intent on providing more of a choice for the region than has existed since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Western reaction to his policy in Ukraine has given him even more of an incentive to do so. Russia may be headed for long-term stagnation—unless oil rebounds—but not for

sudden economic collapse.⁴²⁸ Besides, Putin, in his own mind, is not going anywhere. Rather, he is already looking ahead to dealing—for better or worse—with President Obama’s successor.⁴²⁹

The same well-known strategic thinker who judged Putin at the top of his game in October 2013—before the travails of Crimea—marveled in February and May 2015 that the Russian president was now in even better shape than 10 years earlier. Putin, he said, feels good, is a fighter, and is bursting with energy. Russia was playing its game much better than anyone could have expected. The Middle East was a region where Moscow could exercise its political muscle without having to pay much. Putin’s big problem remains economic policy. But he has suppressed his domestic political opposition and co-opted many of their ideas. This was all cynical, of course, but well done. At this juncture, this hard-boiled observer opined, we can likely expect Putin to stay president for life.⁴³⁰

Appendix A: Crimea—Damn the Cost

Putin did not demonstrably consult with economic experts before annexing Crimea. The lack of any evident input by international economic experts in the Crimea decision was striking. According to some accounts, Putin simply did not care what the economic impact might be. Only 2 months later did the Russian president ostentatiously consult economic experts when he invited former long-term Finance Minister Kudrin and others to the Kremlin. The meeting reportedly took place the evening of April 22, 2014.⁴³¹

However, it is inconceivable that Putin did not make some rough estimates of the potential costs of subsidizing Crimea and of inevitable Western sanctions. Evidently, Putin calculated that Western avoidance of self-sacrifice meant that sanctions would never be all that serious. For much of 2014, he would try to split the Europeans away from supporting the United States on sanctions.⁴³² In any event, early on in Russia's Ukraine campaign, the view in Moscow was that Russia could withstand several years of sanctions before its reserves were exhausted.⁴³³

Putin likely also counted on increased trade with China and other non-Western markets. In fact, on May 21, 2014, Russia and China signed a 30-year, \$400 billion gas deal, but kept the gas price a "commercial secret." Some observers, however, suggested that the deal would contribute minimally to the ailing Russian state budget.⁴³⁴ Moreover, experts would warn that Russia would now have to focus on not getting drawn into China's economic and geopolitical orbit.⁴³⁵ All of this, of course, was before the precipitous drop in world oil prices shook Russia's economy. Toward the end of the year, as the ruble depreciated some 40 percent against the dollar, Russia's own Finance Minister Anton Siluanov calculated the impact of the oil price drop at \$90–\$100 billion and of sanctions at \$40 billion.⁴³⁶

Curiously, Putin did not seem to have given full weight to Iran's experience with sanctions when calculating the potential Western reaction to his intervention into Ukraine. In contrast, analysts in Moscow who had long followed Iran had by this time gained grudging respect for the ability of the West to enforce sanctions and to use them to bring about policy change. For these Iran watchers, Western sanctions were no trivial matter and Western enforcement could be tenacious. A decade earlier, most had dismissed the ability of U.S. and EU sanctions to slow down or curtail the Iranian nuclear program. By 2014, however, most agreed that it had been Western sanctions that had forced Iran to the P5+1 bargaining table, and might soon produce an agreement.⁴³⁷

Appendix B: The Diplomatic Perils of Russian Nationalism

With the propaganda campaign accompanying his annexation of Crimea, Putin used Russian nationalist sentiment to deflate anti-Putin sentiment.⁴³⁸ In stoking the nationalism theme, however, Putin has been careful to mine its anti-Western veins while working against its racist, anti-Islamic, anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant, and anti-guest workers strains. If Putin is not able to keep the racist strains in check, there will be significant domestic and diplomatic consequences for Russia in the Middle East, particularly in Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Turkey has been especially sensitive to discrimination against Crimea's indigenous Muslim Tatars by local ethnic Russians.⁴³⁹ Ankara puts their numbers at 280,000, some 13 percent of Crimea's population.⁴⁴⁰ Early on, Turkish Prime Minister and then President Recep Tayyip Erdogan repeatedly raised the issue with Putin.⁴⁴¹ Crimean Tatar leader Mustafa Dzhemilev visited the United States, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, where he lobbied the leadership of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) against Russian aggression in Crimea and on behalf of making Ukraine an associate member of the OIC.⁴⁴²

Putin in turn has dealt carefully with the issue given its potential repercussions across the Middle East. He signed a decree rehabilitating the Crimean Tatars, who were exiled from their homeland by Soviet leader Iosif Stalin during World War II. He phoned Crimean Tatar leader Dzhemilev. And he met with a delegation of Crimean Tatars on the eve of the 70th anniversary of their deportation to Central Asia.⁴⁴³

Putin and Erdogan seem determined not to let differences over Syria, Crimea, and now the Armenian genocide issue disrupt booming economic ties.⁴⁴⁴ When Putin visited Ankara on December 1, Erdogan at least in public notably pulled his punches on the Crimean Tatar issue, telling the press that he had found the Russian "approach positive."⁴⁴⁵ The Turkish leader may have regarded his lenient treatment of the Tatar issue as a bargaining quid pro quo for Putin's surprise redirection of the South Stream gas pipeline. A \$22 billion project already under construction under the Black Sea, the new pipeline had been strenuously opposed by the United States and the EU, especially in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea. Erdogan again employed fancy verbal footwork on the Crimean Tatar issue when he visited Kyiv to meet with President Poroshenko on March 20, 2015, expressing concern but saying little that Moscow could have found offensive.⁴⁴⁶

In one sense, Putin's annexation of Crimea was a weird and convoluted consequence of Russia's long-commended demographic decline. This did not directly cause Putin to invade and take over the Crimea. But frictions arising from the presence in Russia of an estimated 20 mil-

lion or more Muslims—some 16 million permanent citizens plus migrant workers from Central Asia and Azerbaijan—had helped set the stage, in turn, for the racist Russian nationalist demonstrations of recent years, even in Moscow itself.⁴⁴⁷ These outbursts had arguably contributed to the anti-Putin sentiment that he was able finally, if only temporarily, to surmount with the Crimea operation.

One source of negative views toward Putin before Crimea came from Russian nationalists, particularly of the racist variety. In recent years, there had been repeated outbursts of anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic sentiment across Russia. They had begun most notably with the Manezh riots in central Moscow in December 2010. More recently, in October 2013, there had been violent disturbances in the Moscow suburb of Biryulovo.⁴⁴⁸ Both had been sparked by the killing of Russians by suspects from either the North Caucasus or Caucasus.⁴⁴⁹

In each case, Moscow tried hard to defuse the protests without provoking a further spread of the phenomenon. Putin even visited the grave of the young Russian whose killing had sparked the Manezh unrest. Nevertheless, just after the Biryulovo riots, a politically active Russian noted that Russian nationalist sentiment had been running neck and neck with anti-Putin sentiment in Facebook comments.⁴⁵⁰ While unscientific, the observation jibed with Levada polling at the time: 66 percent of respondents across Russia had supported the slogan “Russia for Russians,” and 71 percent approved of the call to “Stop Feeding the Caucasus.”⁴⁵¹ Also, an academic review of Levada polling results detected a trend toward increased proportional communist and nationalist participation in demonstrations from December 2011 to the “March Against Scoundrels” of January 2013.⁴⁵²

In taking back Crimea and giving voice to Russian nationalist fervor, Putin went far in marginalizing the Russian opposition and minimizing any impulse among the Russian public to turn out again in massive demonstrations against Putin, as they had in 2011 and 2012. As long as the public sees Putin as caring for Russia and making sure Russia is not ignored, they will continue to support him, predicted some well-known Russian observers.⁴⁵³

At home, though, it is essential to Putin not to let the racist and xenophobic version of the Russian nationalist genie further out of the bottle, given Russia’s ethnic and confessional diversity and the sensitivity in the Middle East to the treatment of Muslims in Russia, now in particular to Crimean Tatars. Ten to 15 percent of Russia’s 143 million population is nominally Islamic and manpower shortages make Russia dependent on millions of guest workers from Central Asia and the Caucasus. It is also important to Putin to work toward mitigating Sunni-Shia differences within Russia itself, not just in the Middle East. Some 3 million of Russia’s 15–20 million Muslims are Shiite.⁴⁵⁴

The low turnout for the Russian nationalists' march on November 4, 2014, suggested to many that Putin had indeed succeeded in splitting and for the time being marginalizing the anti-Putin Russian nationalist movement.⁴⁵⁵ Or, as Vasily Kashin perceptively put it, Putin had defeated "ethnic nationalism" with "state nationalism."⁴⁵⁶ "I am the biggest nationalist in Russia," Putin declared around this time, while again warning that intolerant and chauvinistic nationalism would destroy multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Russia.⁴⁵⁷

Notes

¹ John W. Parker, *Persian Dreams: Moscow and Tehran Since the Fall of the Shah* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, Inc., 2009).

² John W. Parker, *Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program: Replay or Breakthrough?* INSS Strategic Perspectives No. 9 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, March 2012).

³ “Transcript of speech by Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev at a conference with Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives to international organizations in Moscow 12 July 2010 at 1700 hours,” *En.Kremlin.ru*, July 12, 2010.

⁴ I am grateful for the research of Adam Lukszo and Rafael Broze, interns with the Institute for National Strategic Studies at National Defense University, on this subject. Russia’s “strategic partnership” with Egypt was formalized in June 2009, during then-President Medvedev’s visit to Cairo. See Yelena Suponina, “Russian-Egyptian Relations Said to Reach ‘New Level’ With Medvedev Cairo Trip,” *Vremya Novostey Online*, June 24, 2009. Russia also has a strategic partnership with Algeria, but this country lies outside the scope of this study.

⁵ Parker, *Persian Dreams*, 83–102, 207–222.

⁶ For early appraisals, see Vitaly Naumkin et al., “Islam in Politics: Ideology or Pragmatism?” Valdai Discussion Club Analytical Report, *Valdaclub.com*, August 2013; Irina Donovna Zviagelskaya, *Russia and the Arab Spring: Perception and Policy* [Россия и «арабское пробуждение»: восприятие и политика], Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Oriental Studies, *Bulletin, Assessments and Ideas* 1, no. 3 (April 2013); and Yelena V. Suponina, *The Arab Spring: Consequences for Russian and World Politics* [«Арабская весна»: последствия для российской и мировой политики], Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, no. 4 (2012), 7–38.

⁷ International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook, 2008* (Washington, DC: IMF, 2009).

⁸ See, for example, Dmitri Trenin, *The Mythical Alliance: Russia’s Syria Policy*, The Carnegie Papers (Washington, DC: Carnegie Moscow Center, February 2013).

⁹ Briefing by Alexei Sazonov, Deputy Director of the Press and Information Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, April 29, 2011, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

¹⁰ “Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Interview to the Newspaper Rossiyskaya Gazeta; 21 September 2011,” September 21, 2011, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

¹¹ “Russia Has No Special Interests in Syria—Putin,” *Interfax*, June 21, 2011. See also Vladimir Putin’s later elaborations of this theme: “Prime Minister Vladimir Putin Meets with Editors-in-chief of Leading Foreign Media Outlets,” March 5, 2012 (the meeting actually took place on March 2), available at <<http://premier.gov.ru/en/events/>>; “Working Visit to France,” June 1, 2012, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru>>; Kathy Lally, “Putin Takes Opponents’ Questions, Gives No Ground,” *Washington Post*, September 20, 2013.

¹² “Decisions on Syria Possible if President Asad Fails to Restore Peace—Medvedev,” *Interfax*, August 5, 2011.

¹³ Liz Sly, “Bloodshed Backfiring on Syrian Government,” *Washington Post*, August 10, 2011.

¹⁴ J. David Goodman, “Saudi Arabia Ramps Up Pressure on Syria,” *New York Times*, August 9, 2011.

¹⁵ Steven Lee Myers, “U.S. Leads Allies in Call for Chief of Syria to Quit,” *New York Times*, August 19, 2011.

¹⁶ See preface. In 2010–2015, the author visited Moscow 11 times to conduct research and consult with various Russian experts. These visits are cited throughout this paper as “Author’s conversations in Moscow.”

¹⁷ Author’s conversations in Moscow, February and July 2011.

¹⁸ Ibid., February 2012.

¹⁹ Ibid., October 2013. See also the more recent comparative assessment by Nikolay Kozhanov, “Russian-Syrian Dialogue: Myths and Realities,” *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 5, no. 1 (March 2014), 1–22, available at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2014.883257>>.

²⁰ “Putin Raps TV Footage Showing Qadhafi Death,” *Interfax*, October 27, 2011.

²¹ “Prime Minister Vladimir Putin Meets with Editors-in-chief.”

²² “Expressions Like ‘Crusades’ Unacceptable with Respect to Situation in Libya—Medvedev,” *Interfax*, March 21, 2011.

²³ Natalya Kostenko, “The Power Castling Has Put an End to Modernization,” *Vedomosti.ru*, December 30, 2011, available at <www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/1467118/vse_dlya_fronta#ixzz1iOH0yaF>.

²⁴ Ambassador Vladimir Chamov was recalled to Moscow and reportedly fired for his objections to Russia’s abstention on Resolution 1973. However, he resurfaced at the Foreign Ministry in July 2012, after Putin again was president. In November 2014, he was named Russian ambassador to Mauritania. See “Russian Diplomat Sacked as Ambassador to Libya under Medvedev Appointed Ambassador to Mauritania,” *Interfax*, November 11, 2014.

²⁵ Author’s conversations in Moscow, February 2012.

²⁶ Ibid., October 2013.

²⁷ Two more vetoes followed on February 4, 2012, and July 19, 2012.

²⁸ “Reset in Russian-U.S. Relations Ended Not Because of Crimea But Because of Libya—Putin,” *Interfax*, April 17, 2014.

²⁹ Stepan Goncharov, “Putin in Public Opinion: Before and After the Political Castling,” Levada Analytic Center, October 15, 2013, available at <www.levada.ru/15-10-2013/putin-v-obshchestvennom-nmenii-do-i-posle-politicheskoi-rokirovki>; “Presidential Elections in March: What Russians Expect,” Levada-Center, January 12, 2012; Yelena Vlasenko, “Punkslavism,” April 9, 2014, available at <<http://grani.ru/Society/m.227547.html>>; and Lev Gudkov, “The Kind of Country We Live In: Russian Society from November to March,” April 7, 2014. All polling cited in this paper is by the Levada Analytic Center, Russia’s only independent polling company.

³⁰ “Putin Announces Presidential Bid, with Medvedev Backing,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 24, 2011, available at <www.rferl.org/content/medvedev_says_putin_should_be_next_russian_president/24338593.html>.

³¹ Will Englund, “Putin Pulls in a Wave of Boos on Fight Night,” *Washington Post*, November 22, 2011.

³² Mikhail Loginov, “From Shadows to Darkness,” *OpenDemocracy.com*, May 8, 2013, available at <www.opendemocracy.net/print/72594>. In October 2014, this same Volodin would argue that

“there is no Russia today if there is no Putin.” See “No Putin, No Russia,’ Says Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff,” *Moscow Times Online*, October 23, 2014.

³³ David M. Herszenhorn and Ellen Barry, “Putin Contends Clinton Incited Russian Unrest,” *New York Times*, December 9, 2011.

³⁴ On the continuing impact of the 2011–2012 protests, see Mikhail Rostovskiy, “Putin’s Reset: How the Kremlin Intends to Run Russia in a New Way. Regime Needs Oppositionists as Sparring Partners,” *MK Online*, July 11, 2014. On the campaign against Ambassador McFaul and the rise of Russian nationalist influence in Russian politics, see David Remnick, “Watching the Eclipse,” *The New Yorker*, August 11 and 18, 2014, 52–65.

³⁵ David M. Herszenhorn, “Putin Wins Vote, But Opposition Keeps Pressing,” *New York Times*, March 5, 2012. On YouTube, see “Putin’s Victory Speech 2012 (with English subtitles) by isselman 2080,” available at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=30oMuEo4eDw>.

³⁶ Goncharov.

³⁷ For details, see Parker, *Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program*, 40–46. The intensity of the debate in 2009–2012 in Israeli political and security circles over striking Iran was still in evidence years later. See, for example, Ben Caspit, “Why Didn’t Netanyahu Attack Iran?” *Al-Monitor*, June 8, 2015, available at <www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/israel-jerusalem-post-conference-dagan-ashkenazi-iran-attack.html>.

³⁸ Jerry Markon and Karen DeYoung, “U.S. Says Iran Plotted to Kill Saudi Envoy,” *Washington Post*, October 12, 2011; Helene Cooper, “Obama Says Facts Support Accusation of Iranian Plot,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2011; Liz Sly, “Opening Old Wounds in Region,” *Washington Post*, October 13, 2011.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Liz Sly, “Syria Edging Closer to Armed Civil Conflict,” *Washington Post*, November 17, 2011.

⁴¹ The Foreign Ministry put out a statement asserting that Moscow was “ready to cooperate with all interested states, including the United States.” See “Russia Concerned by Reports on Planned Terror Attacks in USA—Ministry,” October 12, 2011, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>. Lavrov cautioned that Moscow would not comment on the alleged conspiracy until after hearing American experts lay out the case. See “Russia Not to Comment on Alleged Iran Murder Plot Before U.S. Explanations—Lavrov,” *Interfax*, October 18, 2011. For the plotter’s ultimate judicial fate, see Benjamin Weiser, “25-Year Prison Term in Plot to Kill Saudi Ambassador,” *New York Times*, May 31, 2013.

⁴² “Russia Scales Down Diplomatic Ties with Qatar after Attack on Its Ambassador,” December 5, 2011, accessed at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>. Ambassador Titorenko became Deputy Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Department of Crisis Management (email followup to conversation in Moscow, February 2014).

⁴³ As Gregory Gause noted on October 24, 2013, in his presentation on Gulf diplomacy at the Carnegie Endowment in Washington, DC. For an analysis and overview of the ebb and flow of Turkish, Qatari, and Saudi diplomacy vis-à-vis Syria, see Emile Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 110–123. For an account of shipments of arms and equipment from Qatar and Saudi Arabia through Turkey beginning in early 2012, see C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, “Airlift to Rebels in Syria Expands with C.I.A.’s Help,” *New York Times*, March 25, 2013.

⁴⁴ Mark Landler and Steven Lee Myers, “Healing a Rift, U.S. Agrees to \$30 Billion Fighter Jet Sale to Saudi Arabia,” *New York Times*, December 30, 2011.

⁴⁵ According to one report, Russia and Saudi Arabia were negotiating contracts for helicopters, tanks, infantry combat vehicles, and air defense systems worth around \$2 billion. See Nikolay Surkov, “Saudi Arabia Buys Arms from Russia,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, August 31, 2009; and “Russia, Saudi Arabia Negotiating Price of Arms Contracts,” *Interfax-AVN Online*, December 3, 2009. According to another report, Rosoboronexport and Almaz-Antei were in negotiations with Saudi Arabia on a \$4-billion package that could make Saudi Arabia the first country to purchase the S-400 and Antei-2500 air defense systems. See *Interfax*, July 29, 2009. A year later, yet another report upped the total value of a package of contracts to \$4–\$6 billion. See “Russia, Saudi Arabia Finalizing Major Arms Deal—State Exporter,” *RIA-Novosti*, June 16, 2010.

⁴⁶ “Experts Say Russia Will Try to Persuade Syrian President to Step Down,” *RIA-Novosti*, February 5, 2012.

⁴⁷ United Nations (UN), “Action Group for Syria, Final Communiqué, 30.06.2012,” available at <www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniquéActionGroupforSyria.pdf>. See also “Russia Will Not Allow UN Security Council to Sanction External Interference in Syria—Lavrov,” *Interfax*, January 18, 2012; and Will Englund, “Russia’s Top Diplomat Lists Objections to U.S. Policy,” *Washington Post*, January 19, 2012.

⁴⁸ Nick Cumming-Bruce and Rod Norland, “Powers Agree on Plan for a Syrian Transition, But Not for Removing Asad,” *New York Times*, July 1, 2012.

⁴⁹ Author’s conversations in Moscow, July 2012.

⁵⁰ Vladimir Putin, “Russia in a Changing World: Stable Priorities and New Opportunities,” July 9, 2012, available at <<http://eng.news.kremlin.ru/news/4145/print>>. Seven months later, in the new edition of the *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, the Near East and North Africa were listed after the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Euro-Atlantic, and the Asia-Pacific regions but ahead of Latin America and Africa. See *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, Approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin on 12 February 2013, March 14, 2013. Russia’s regional priorities are listed in section IV, paragraphs 88–91.

⁵¹ Kareem Fahim, “Profiles of Syrian Officials Targeted in Damascus Blast,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2012. Until he reportedly reappeared in June 2014, it was rumored that Maher Asad, the president’s brother and head of Syria’s feared Republican Guard, had also been killed by the July 2012 blast or in combat not long afterward. See “Maher Asad Appears for First Time in Four Years,” *Naharnet*, June 20, 2014, available at <www.naharnet.com/stories/en/135685-maher-Asad-appears-for-first-time-in-four-years>.

⁵² Author’s conversations in Moscow, July 2012.

⁵³ See, for example, “Russian Commentators [Valeriy Shnyakin, Mikhail Margelov, Yevgeniy Satanovskiy, Aleksandr Shumilin] Link Attacks on U.S. Diplomatic Missions to Arab Spring,” *Interfax*, September 13, 2012; “Russia Has Chance to Broaden Influence in Middle East, North Africa—Zyuganov,” *Interfax*, September 7, 2012; and “Placing Bets on Arab Spring was U.S. Mistake—Russian Parliamentarian [Alexei Pushkov],” *Interfax-AVN Online*, September 20, 2012.

⁵⁴ Andrei Nekrasov, “Russia’s Motives in Syria Are Not All Geopolitical,” *Financial Times*, June 19, 2013, available at <www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f41794d4-d738-11e2-a26a-00144feab7de.html#ixzz2WsLAqn51>.

⁵⁵ Interview with Georgiy Mirskiy, by Mariya Makutina, “The War Will Go On Until the Sides Run Out of Blood,” *Gazeta.ru*, June 7, 2013.

⁵⁶ Mikhail Barabanov and Ruslan Aliyev, “Russian Interests in Syria: Myths and Reality,” Center for Analysis of Strategy and Technology, June 2012, available at <www.cast.ru>.

⁵⁷ Author’s conversations in Moscow, February 2012. See also Barabanov and Aliyev; and Aleksandr Golts, as quoted in “Pundit Says Syria Is Russia’s Biggest Arms Purchaser in Middle East,” Ekho Moskvy News Agency, January 31, 2012. Specifying lobbying by Israel but only alluding to Syria, Putin noted the nondelivery of S-300s to Syria in his most recent televised call-in session. See “Russia chose not to supply S-300 missiles to Arab country over Israel’s position—Putin,” *Interfax*, April 16, 2015.

⁵⁸ Author’s conversations in Moscow, July 2012.

⁵⁹ “Russian Technical Expert Reveals Part of the Electronic War Between the Syrian Authority and Its Adversaries; Tehran Delivered Mohajer Drones to Syria, and Moscow Delivered ‘Avtobaza’ System, Which Hacked Thuraya and Other Satellite Transmission Networks,” *Al-Haqiqah* (www.syriatruth.info), March 10, 2012; “Russia Supplies Electronic Intelligence Systems to Iran,” *RIA-Novosti*, October 25, 2011; and author’s conversations in Moscow, February 2012.

⁶⁰ Liz Sly and Karen DeYoung, “Strong-arming,” *Washington Post*, February 24, 2013.

⁶¹ Peter Baker et al., “Off-the-Cuff Obama Line Puts U.S. in Bind on Syria,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2013.

⁶² James Kanter, “European Nations End Weapons Embargo, Creating Path to Arming Syrian Rebels,” *New York Times*, May 28, 2013.

⁶³ Karen DeYoung and Anne Gearan, “U.S. to Scale Up Military Support for Syrian Rebels,” *Washington Post*, June 14, 2013; and Mark Mazzetti, Michael R. Gordon, and Mark Landler, “U.S. Is Said to Plan to Send Weapons to Syrian Rebels,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2013.

⁶⁴ Author’s conversations in Moscow, October 2013.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Ivan Safronov and Yelena Chernenko, “By the MiG—March! Moscow Dramatically Steps Up Appearance of Military-Technical Cooperation With Damascus,” *Kommersant*, June 1–4, 2013; Karen DeYoung and Joby Warrick, “Russia Sends Arms to Syria As It Reasserts Role in Region,” *Washington Post*, May 30, 2013; and Michael Peel, “Iran, Russia and China Prop Up Asad Economy,” *Financial Times*, June 27, 2013, available at <www.ft.com/cms/s/0/79eca81c-df48-11e2-a9f4-00144feab7de.html>.

⁶⁶ “Russia Disappointed by EU Lifting Embargo on Arms Supplies to Syrian Opposition—Minister,” *Interfax*, May 29, 2013.

⁶⁷ Yevgeniy Shestakov, “White House Tired Without War. Is the United States Preparing for an Invasion of Syria?” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta Online*, June 17, 2013.

⁶⁸ Thomas Grove, “Insight—Syria Pays for Russian Weapons to Boost Ties with Moscow,” *Reuters*, August 29, 2013.

⁶⁹ “Russia Basically Fulfilled Arms Contracts with Syria Before U.S. Threats of Force—Source,” *Interfax*, September 4, 2013.

⁷⁰ Author’s conversations in Moscow, October 2013, and February and June 2014; Rick Gladstone and Ravi Somaia, “Continuation of Monitors Inside Syria Is in Doubt,” *New York Times*, June 20, 2012; “MV Alaed to Deliver Repaired Helicopters, Air Defense Weapons to Syria—Source”

Interfax-AMV Online, July 16, 2012; and “Russia Basically Fulfilled Arms Contracts with Syria Before U.S. Threats of Force.”

⁷¹ This was essentially a distinction without a difference, but one that both sides have seen as important to maintain. In a recent major interview, for example, Asad distinguished between pre-war “contracts” and subsequent “accords”: “There are contracts that were concluded before the beginning of the crisis that have been fulfilled during the crisis. There are also other accords on arms deliveries and cooperation that have been signed during the crisis and are being fulfilled at the present time.” See interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, by Konstantin Volkov, in Damascus, “We Will Not Be Broken. Bashir Al-Assad: A Russian Presence in Various Regions of the World Is Essential in Order to Maintain the Balance of Power,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta Online*, March 27, 2015.

⁷² Author’s conversations in Moscow, October 2013, and February and June 2014.

⁷³ Jackie Calmes, “Obama and Putin at Odds on Syria, But Want Talks,” *New York Times*, June 18, 2013.

⁷⁴ Pavel Tarasenko, “G8 Changes Little in Syria; Authorities and Opposition Ignore G8 Summit Statement,” *Kommersant Online*, June 20, 2013.

⁷⁵ Pavel Tarasenko, Ivan Safronov, and Yelena Chernenko, “Reset Paused,” *Kommersant Online*, August 12, 2013.

⁷⁶ Joby Warrick, “Spy Agencies Recorded Each Step in Alleged Attack, U.S. Report Says,” *Washington Post*, August 31, 2013.

⁷⁷ Author’s conversations in Moscow, October 2013. For an expert American assessment, see Chandler P. Atwood and Jeffrey White, “Syrian Air-Defense Capabilities and the Threat to Potential U.S. Air Operations,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 2257, May 23, 2014, available at <<http://washin.st/S0zyq7>>. All that, however, had to be balanced against the possibility of totally removing chemical weapons from the Syrian battleground equation, even while leaving loopholes such as chlorine gas in the deal. See Rick Gladstone, “Claims of Chlorine-Filled Bombs Overshadow Progress by Syria on Chemical Weapons,” *New York Times*, April 23, 2014. In addition, given Tehran’s investment in the Asad regime, an American strike against it could have derailed any effort by the newly elected Rouhani administration to reach out to Washington and to move toward more serious negotiations with the P5+1 on Iran’s nuclear program.

⁷⁸ Vladimir Putin, “Russia and the Changing World,” *Moskovskiye Novosti*, February 27, 2012.

⁷⁹ Vladimir Putin, “President’s Address to Federal Assembly,” December 12, 2013.

⁸⁰ Author’s conversations in Moscow, February 2014.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Parker, *Persian Dreams*, passim; and Parker, *Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program*, passim.

⁸⁵ For expert analyses of multiple facets of Russia’s relations with Iran during Ahmadinejad’s presidency, see Nina Mikhaylovna Mamedova, Yelena V. Dunaeva, and many other notable Russian specialists, in *Iran Under M. Ahmadinejad* [Иран при М. Ахмадинежаде] (Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Oriental Studies, 2013).

⁸⁶ Yevgeny Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present*, trans. Paul Gould (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 315, 368–369.

⁸⁷ Parker, *Persian Dreams*, 216–219, 273–275, 289–292.

⁸⁸ “Prime Minister Vladimir Putin Meets with Editors-in-chief.”

⁸⁹ L.M. Kulagina and V.M. Akhmedov, “Iran’s Policy in the Middle East After the War in Iraq,” in *The Role and the Place of Iran in the Region* [Роль и место Ирана в регионе], ed. N.M. Mamedova and M. Imanipur (Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Oriental Studies, 2007), 99–111.

⁹⁰ Author’s conversations in Moscow, May 2010.

⁹¹ Parker, *Persian Dreams*, 70–72.

⁹² Author’s conversations in Moscow, May 2010, and thereafter. See also Dmitri Trenin, *Russia’s Policy in the Middle East: Prospects for Consensus and Conflict with the United States* (New York: The Century Foundation, 2010), available at <<http://tcf.org/publications/pdfs/pb707/trenin.pdf>>.

⁹³ Mark A. Smith, *Russia and the Persian Gulf: The Deepening of Moscow’s Middle East Policy*, Middle East Series 07/25 (Shrivenham: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, August 2007). After the Soviet collapse, Russia developed a fairly robust relationship with Iran, contracting to build a nuclear power station at Bushehr on the Persian Gulf and selling Iran an array of weapons systems. In Iraq, Russia also profited handsomely from the UN Oil-for-Food program’s sweetheart deals, which it lost after the U.S. invasion in 2003. See Parker, *Persian Dreams*, 103–128, 229–230.

⁹⁴ Mark N. Katz, “Saudi-Russian Relations in the Putin Era,” *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 4 (Autumn 2001), 612–617.

⁹⁵ Renat Abdullin and Aleksandr Korzun, “Saudi Crown Prince Abdallah: Chechen Question Is Russia’s Internal Affair,” *Izvestiya*, September 6, 2003.

⁹⁶ “SPA Reports on Saudi-Russian Statement at End of Prince Abdallah’s Moscow Visit,” Saudi Press Agency, September 2003. Andrey Baklanov was Moscow’s ambassador to Riyadh during these years. For his take on all of the developments discussed in this paragraph, see the notes on his own career at the end of his book-length tribute to his father, in Andrey Baklanov, *The Youngest General* [Самый молодой генерал] (Moscow: TONCHU, 2012), 285–291, 319–322.

⁹⁷ Parker, *Persian Dreams*, 273–277.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 261–263, 270–271, 289–290, 301–310.

⁹⁹ His visit to Egypt, Israel, and the Palestinian territories in April 2005 had already heralded the Russian leadership’s return to the region after several decades of absence. Together with Russia’s decision to host the Palestinian Hamas leadership for talks in Moscow in March 2006, this meant that Russia, unlike the United States, now had relations with all parties in the Middle East. See Smith, “Russia and the Persian Gulf?”

¹⁰⁰ Marina Ottaway, *Iran, the United States, and the Gulf: The Elusive Regional Policy*, Carnegie Papers, Middle East Program, Number 105 (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2009).

¹⁰¹ Putin and Medvedev referred to “good prospects and good potential” (“Putin Thanks Saudi Arabia for Resolving Problems Quickly,” *Interfax*, July 14, 2008) and relations “becoming increasingly stable” (“Medvedev Praises Dynamic Growth in Relations with Saudi Arabia,” *Interfax*, July 14, 2008).

¹⁰²This decision was subsequently reinforced in September 2009 by the revelation of a new Iranian enrichment facility outside Qom and Iran's turndown several months later of the P5+1 offer to have Russia and France enrich the bulk of Iran's low-enriched uranium for medical use by the Tehran Research Reactor. By summer 2009, the reports that began to surface of Saudi negotiations for Russian arms must have made Tehran nervous.

¹⁰³Dana Hedgpeth, "Pentagon Plans Arms Sale to Saudi Arabia," *Washington Post*, October 21, 2010; and Mark Landler and Steven Lee Myers, "Healing a Rift, U.S. Agrees to \$30 Billion Fighter Jet Sale to Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, December 30, 2011. More would follow in April 2013 as part of a \$10-billion package of arms for Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel. See Craig Whitlock, "Pentagon Reaches Deal on \$10 Billion Arms Sale to Middle East Allies," *Washington Post*, April 20, 2013.

¹⁰⁴"Russia, Saudi Arabia Sign Smaller Arms Deals Than Expected—Arms Exporter," *Interfax-AVN Online*, October 26, 2010.

¹⁰⁵Author's conversations in Moscow, May 2010.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., July 2011, February and July 2012, October 2013, and February 2014.

¹⁰⁷Yevgeniy Satanovskiy, "Iran, the Once and Future Empire," *Izvestiya*, August 14, 2006.

¹⁰⁸Stanislav Khatuntsev, "Iran and the Prospects of a New War," *Izvestiya Online*, May 17, 2012, available at <<http://izvestia.ru/news/524683>>. The author is grateful to Simon Williams and Matthew Gill for their research on Khatuntsev, whose last name has on occasion been erroneously transcribed into English. See also the comments of Igor Korotchenko, chief editor of the *Natsionalnaya Oborona* [National Defense] magazine, in "Russian Expert Hints at Possibility of Resuming S-300 Contract With Iran," *RIA Novosti*, May 31, 2013.

¹⁰⁹Author's conversations in Moscow, July 2012.

¹¹⁰Mikhail Kalmykov, "Russia, Iran Sign Relations and Cooperation Treaty," ITAR-TASS, March 12, 2001. For context, see Parker, *Persian Dreams*, 208–211. The full text of the treaty is available at <www.lawrussia.ru/texts/legal_523/doc523a391x473.htm>.

¹¹¹"On the Meeting of Secretary of the Russian Federation Security Council N.P. Patrushev with the delegation of the Supreme National Security Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran," November 9, 2011, available at <www.scrf.gov.ru/news/683.html>. The deputies who prepared the draft were Ye. V. Lukyanov and Ali Baqeri-Kyani.

¹¹²Igor Pankratenko, "Igor Pankratenko: Russia's 'Iranian Vector': Nikolay Patrushev in Tehran," *Regnum* (*Regnum.ru*), October 22, 2014.

¹¹³Author's conversations in Moscow, February 2014.

¹¹⁴Ibid., October 2013, and February, June, and September 2014.

¹¹⁵"Putin, Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan discuss bilateral relations, Middle East affairs," *Interfax*, July 31, 2013; and "Russian President Discusses Iran, Syria with Visiting Saudi Intelligence Chief," *En.Kremlin.ru*, December 3, 2013.

¹¹⁶"On a Telephone Conversation Between Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov and Prince Bandar Bin-Sultan Bin-Abd-al-Aziz Al Sa'ud, Secretary-General of the Council of National Security and Director of General Intelligence of Saudi Arabia," August 21, 2013, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>; and "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Receives Telephone Call from Russian President," *SPA Online*, November 10, 2013.

¹¹⁷ Author's conversations in Moscow, October 2013, and February, June, and September 2014. Prince Bandar's subsequent fate back home continued to fuel the speculation. See, for example, Thomas W. Lippman, "Saudi Intel Chief Prince Bandar Is Out, But Is He Really Out?" *LobeLog*, April 15, 2014, available at <www.lobelog.com/saudi-intel-chief-prince-bandar-is-out/>.

¹¹⁸ For a recent example, see Andrey Ivanov, "Black Prince of Terror. Russia Is Becoming a Scene of the Activity of the Most Exotic Outfits," *Svobodnaya Pressa* (svpressa.ru), January 21, 2014.

¹¹⁹ Author's conversations in Moscow, February 2014.

¹²⁰ "Prince Bandar Bin-Sultan's Most Significant Achievement in Moscow: Establishment of Saudi Intelligence Bureau to Hunt Down Chechnyans," *Ra'y al-Yawm* (raialyoun.com), January 4, 2014.

¹²¹ Author's conversation in Moscow, June 2014; and Tyler Durden, "Russian Ships Carrying Soldiers Said to Be En Route to Sevastopol," *Zero Hedge*, February 24, 2014, available at <www.zerohedge.com/news/2014-02-24/russian-ships-carrying-soldiers-said-be-en-route-sevastopol>. See also the excellent comprehensive analysis of the Crimean operation by the Moscow Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies; Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov, eds., *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine* (Minneapolis: East View Press, 2014), particularly the chapter by Anton Lavrov, "Russian Again: The Military Operation for Crimea." Lavrov reports speculation that the *Nikolay Filchenkov* was used to spirit deposed President Viktor Yanukovich out of Ukraine to Russia.

¹²² "Vladimir Putin, Is That You?" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 7, 2015, available at <www.rferl.org/content/vladimir-putin-defends-ukraine-borders/26942991.html?utm_medium=email>.

¹²³ Cited in Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 360.

¹²⁴ Author's conversations in Moscow, June and September 2014. Even close observers of Russian military-political developments were caught flatfooted by the decision to annex Crimea. See, for example, Ruslan Pukhov, "What Putin Really Wants," *New York Times*, March 5, 2014, in which Pukhov argued that Putin had no intention of annexing Crimea just a day or so before it became clear that was exactly what Putin had in mind. Several months later, Andrey Illarionov would argue that Putin planned the Crimea annexation beginning in 2003–2004 (available at www.echo.msk.ru/blog/aillar/1338912-echo/). For a useful rebuttal, see Hill and Gaddy, 336–339.

¹²⁵ For the text of the memorandum, see United Nations, General Assembly Security Council, "Letter dated 7 December 1994 from the Permanent Representatives of the Russian Federation, Ukraine, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General," A/49/765*, S/1994/1399*, December 19, 1994, available at <www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/49/765>. For an excellent analysis and discussion, see Benjamin Bissell and Cody Poplin, "Throwback Thursday: The 1994 Budapest Memorandum," *Lawfare*, November 20, 2014, at <www.lawfareblog.com/2014/11/throwback-thursday-the-1994-budapest-memorandum/>. The author is indebted to Nicholas Rostow for bringing this analysis to my attention.

¹²⁶ "Text of Russian President Vladimir Putin's interview to TASS News Agency on 24 November 2014," *En.Kremlin.ru*, November 13, 2014.

¹²⁷ "Crimea. Road to the Motherland," Rossiya 1 Television, March 15, 2015, available at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=qksPqLwa6KU>.

¹²⁸ An earlier account of a meeting said to have taken place February 25–26 had the latter three participating but made no mention of Shoygu. See Steven Lee Myers, “Move Into Ukraine Said to Be Born in Shadows,” *New York Times*, March 8, 2014.

¹²⁹ Andrew C. Kuchins, “Is Putin Having a Brezhnev Moment?” *Politico.com*, March 11, 2014, available at <www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/03/putin-brezhnev-moment-crimea-104547.html>.

¹³⁰ Presentation attended by author in Washington, DC, March 2014.

¹³¹ “Russian Foreign Ministry Statement on the Events in Ukraine,” February 24, 2014, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

¹³² “Crimea. Road to the Motherland.”

¹³³ On this thesis, see Pavel K. Baev, “Could Russia Become a Serious Spoiler in the Middle East?” *Ponars Eurasia*, Policy Memo 359, February 20, 2015, available at <www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/could-russia-become-serious-spoiler-middle-east>; and Aleksey Malashenko, “From ISIL to Donbas. On Natural and Artificial Crises,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta Online*, March 6, 2015.

¹³⁴ “Russian President Vladimir Putin Tops Forbes’ 2013 Ranking of the World’s Most Powerful People,” *Forbes.com*, available at <www.forbes.com/sites/forbespr/2013/10/30/forbes-releases-2013-ranking-of-the-worlds-most-powerful-people/>.

¹³⁵ David M. Herszenhorn and Andrew E. Kramer, “Russia Offers Cash Infusion for Ukraine,” *New York Times*, December 18, 2013.

¹³⁶ Author’s conversations in Moscow, October 2013.

¹³⁷ “Text of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s interview to TASS.”

¹³⁸ Fedor Lukyanov, “Romanticism in the Place of Calculation,” *Gazeta.ru*, August 8, 2014, available at <www.gazeta.ru/comments/column/lukyanov/6163529.shtml>.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ This attitude would linger a long time in Moscow. In March 2015, a leading commentator would refer to President Barack Obama on prime-time television as a “spineless peacemaker” for his reluctance to transfer lethal weapons to the Ukrainian government. See Mikhail Leontyev, “Odnako,” Channel One TV, March 11, 2015, available at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WgHe3KQA4k>.

¹⁴¹ Throughout all of this, Russian observers would insist that Putin was not inveterately anti-American. It was something different, one argued. Putin was a cool calculator. He had indeed grown to distrust the United States, but this was not just the distrust of a career KGB officer. Putin had accumulated a lot of experience in the previous 12 years. In Putin’s eyes, George W. Bush had double-crossed him, and Obama could not deliver. So Putin’s distrust had become total. Author’s conversation in Moscow, October 2013. Indeed, according to several veterans of the Russian establishment, the perception of many around Putin was that the United States only wanted to “screw” Russia, so it was better not to deal with America. In early July 2009, just days before he first met Putin in Moscow, Obama stated, “Medvedev understands that [the old Cold War approach to U.S.-Russia relations is outdated, but] I think that Putin has one [foot] in the old ways of doing business and one foot in the new.” This had been a big insult and it never got any better. Author’s discussions in Paris, September 2014. Putin retorted the next day, “We don’t stand bow-legged.” See Adrian Blomfield, “Vladimir Putin rejects Barack Obama’s claim he has one foot in the past,” *The Telegraph* (London), July 3, 2009, available at <www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/5734243/Vladimir-Putin-rejects-Barack-Obamas-claim-he-has-one-foot-in-the-past.html>.

one-foot-in-the-past.html>. Six years later, summing up Putin's actions in Ukraine and the state of the Russian economy, Obama remarked, "You'll recall that three or four months ago, everybody in Washington was convinced that President Putin was a genius. . . . And today, you know, I'd sense that at least outside of Russia, maybe some people are thinking what Putin did wasn't so smart. National Public Radio, "Transcript: President Obama's Full NPR Interview [with Steve Inskeep]," *NPR.org*, December 29, 2014, available at <www.npr.org/2014/12/29/372485968/transcript-president-obamas-full-npr-interview>. Obama returned to these themes in his next State of the Union speech: "Mr. Putin's aggression it was suggested was a masterful display of strategy and strength. That's what I heard from some folks. Well, today . . . Russia is isolated with its economy in tatters." See "Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address," *WhiteHouse.gov*, January 20, 2015, available at <www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-january-20-2015>. Thus, mixed in with Putin's security, economic, and political motives, there could also have been elements of revenge and anger. Putin could be emotional, argued one Moscow observer, and could be irritated. Putin likely thought the United States was playing games behind his back and had deceived him. So he had decided "I'll show you what I can do." Author's conversation in Moscow, June 2014. Others pointed out that major Western leaders often did not treat Russia as a first-rank power; they had disrespected Putin personally by not joining him at the Sochi Olympics opening ceremony just over a week before he set in motion his Crimea action. Author's discussions in Paris, September 2014. Late in the year, Stanislav Belkovskiy would describe Putin's actions in Ukraine as those of "a classical rejected lover." See Stanislav Belkovskiy, interview by Konstantin Amelyushkin, "Belkovskiy: I Believe I Am a Russian Patriot, But I Agree with Grybauskaite," *Delfi* (www.ru.delfi.lt), December 5, 2014. For more from Belkovskiy on Putin's personality and growing superiority complex, see his interview by K. Larina and V. Dymarskiy at *Ekho Moskvy*, December 19, 2014, available at <<http://echo.msk.ru/programs/year2014/1457564-echo/>>. See also Hill and Gaddy, 239–284.

¹⁴² Howard LaFranchi, "Western Leaders Stay Away from Sochi Olympics. Snub to Russia?" *Christian Science Monitor*, February 7, 2014, available at <www.csmonitor.com/World/Olympics/2014/0207/Western-leaders-stay-away-from-Sochi-Olympics.-Snub-to-Russia?cmpid=addthis_email>.

¹⁴³ A lengthy reexamination of the development concluded that Yanukovich "was not so much overthrown as cast adrift by his own allies." See Andrew Higgins and Andrew E. Kramer, "Defeated Even Before He Was Ousted," *New York Times*, January 4, 2015.

¹⁴⁴ Henry Meyer, Stepan Kravchenko, and Donna Abu-Nasr, "Putin Defies Obama in Syria as Arms Fuel Asad Resurgence," *Bloomberg.com*, April 4, 2014, available at <www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-04-02/putin-defies-obama-in-syria-as-arms-fuel-Asad-resurgence.html>.

¹⁴⁵ "Action Group for Syria, Final Communiqué, 30.06.2012."

¹⁴⁶ Author's conversations in Moscow, February 2014.

¹⁴⁷ "Russia Will Not Allow UN Security Council to Sanction External Interference in Syria—Lavrov," *Interfax*, January 18, 2012. See also Englund, "Russia's Top Diplomat."

¹⁴⁸ "Ukraine Crisis: Russia Demands Guarantees from NATO" Interview with BBC, November 18, 2014, available at <www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-30107520>; and "We Have Our Red Lines" says Putin's Chief Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov," BBC News, November 19, 2014, available at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADFrdiSPaMo>.

¹⁴⁹ Anders Aslund, *Ukraine's Choice: European Association Agreement or Eurasian Union?* Policy Brief, Number PB13-22 (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, September 2013), available at <www.piie.com/publications/pb/pb13-22.pdf>.

¹⁵⁰ Author's notes on presentation in Washington, DC, March 2014; and Lukyanov, "Romanticism."

¹⁵¹ Author's conversations in Moscow, June and September 2014.

¹⁵² See "Ukraine Crisis: Russia Demands Guarantees from NATO"; and "We Have Our Red Lines."

¹⁵³ "Russians about Vladimir Putin," Levada-Center, March 5, 2014, available at <www.Levada.ru/05-03-2014/Rossiyane-o-vladimire-putine>; and Goncharov.

¹⁵⁴ Andrey Polunin, "President of Unfulfilled Hopes: Vladimir Putin Now Makes an Unfavorable Impression on One Third of Russians," *Svobodnaya Pressa* (svpressa.ru), December 3, 2013.

¹⁵⁵ "Events in Ukraine and Crimea and the Reaction of Russia," Levada-Center, March 26, 2014, available at <www.levada.ru/26-03-2014/proiskhodyashchee-v-ukraine-krymu-i-reaktsiya-Rossii>.

¹⁵⁶ "Russian Attitudes to Other Countries," Levada-Center, March 18, 2014, available at <www.levada.ru/18-03-2014/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-drugim-stranam>.

¹⁵⁷ "Russian Attitudes to Other Countries," Levada-Center, December 8, 2014, available at <www.levada.ru/08-12-2014/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-drugim-stranam>.

¹⁵⁸ "Approval and Trust Ratings in May," Levada-Center, May 29, 2014, available at <www.levada.ru/29-05-2014/maiskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya>.

¹⁵⁹ "Events in Ukraine and Crimea and the Reaction of Russia."

¹⁶⁰ "Possible Results of Presidential and Parliamentary Elections," Levada-Center, April 8, 2014, available at <www.levada.ru/08-04-2014/vozmozhnye-rezultaty-prezidentskikh-i-parlamentskikh-vyborov>.

¹⁶¹ "Possible Results of Presidential and Parliamentary Elections," Levada-Center, May 14, 2014, available at <www.levada.ru/14-05-2014/vozmozhnye-rezultaty-prezidentskikh-i-parlamentskikh-vyborov>. Forty-nine percent of respondents declared in this late April poll that they would like to see Putin reelected president in 2018, up from 26 percent a year earlier and 32 percent in early March.

¹⁶² "Approval and Trust Ratings in May," Levada-Center, May 29, 2014, available at <www.levada.ru/29-05-2014/maiskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya>.

¹⁶³ "Approval and Trust Ratings in April," Levada-Center, April 22, 2015, available at <www.levada.ru/22-04-2015/aprelskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya>; "Approval and Trust Ratings in May," Levada-Center, May 28, 2015, available at <www.levada.ru/28-05-2015/maiskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya>; and "Approval and Trust Ratings in June," Levada-Center, June 24, 2015, available at <www.levada.ru/24-06-2015/iyunske-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya>.

¹⁶⁴ Danila Rozanov, "We are Not Going to Pay for Crimea. Russia's Inhabitants Increasingly Fear Sanctions But Are Not Prepared to Pay for Crimea," *Gazeta.ru*, December 30, 2014. For an intriguing analysis of the domestic political plusses for Putin—beyond sky-high approval ratings—toward the end of 2014, see Eugene Rumer, "From Inside Putin's Parallel Universe, the Crisis Looks Bright," *Financial Times*, December 22, 2014, available at <<http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/12/22/from-inside-putin-s-parallel-universe-crisis-looks-bright>>.

¹⁶⁵ For critiques of the concept of "hybrid war," see Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, *A Closer Look at Russia's "Hybrid War"*, Wilson Center Kennan Cable, No. 7 (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, April 2015); and Ruslan Pukhov, "Nothing 'Hybrid' About Russia's War in Ukraine," *Moscow*

Times, May 27, 2015, available at <www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/nothing-hybrid-about-russia-s-war-in-ukraine/522471.html>.

¹⁶⁶ “Direct Line [April 17, 2014] with Vladimir Putin,” *En.Kremlin.ru*, April 18, 2014.

¹⁶⁷ “Army Supports Honoring Russia’s ‘Polite Men’ Who Annexed Crimea,” *Moscow Times Online*, October 3, 2014.

¹⁶⁸ “Putin Establishes New ‘Polite People’ Day in Russia,” *Moscow Times Online*, February 27, 2015.

¹⁶⁹ For a fascinating look at the political dynamics in Crimea and Moscow from military invasion to formal annexation, see Natalya Galimova, “‘We Are Going to Russia. I Do Not Know How.’ How Russia Annexed Crimea. Investigation by Gazeta.ru,” *Gazeta.ru*, March 12, 2015.

¹⁷⁰ Putin’s address to the Federal Assembly (both houses of the Russian parliament), March 18, 2014, available at <www.kremlin.ru/news/20603>.

¹⁷¹ See, for example, Lukyanov, “Romanticism.”

¹⁷² A valuable resource for tracking the Ukrainian crisis from November 2013 to the present is Center for Strategic and International Studies, “The Ukraine Crisis Timeline,” available at <csis.org/ukraine/index.htm>. Inspired by the bloodless Crimea experience, the hope of the separatists, among whose leaders were adventurers who had crossed over from Russia, was to provoke Russia quickly to intervene militarily and also annex these additional territories. See especially the interview with Igor Strelkov (also known as Igor Grinkin and Strelok) by Alexandre Prokhanov, “Who Are You, ‘Strellok?’” *Zavtra*, November 20, 2014, available at <<http://zavtra.ru/content/view/kto-tyi-strelok/>>; and the account of this interview by Anna Dolgov, “Russia’s Igor Strelkov: I Am Responsible for War in Eastern Ukraine,” *Moscow Times Online*, November 21, 2014. Strelkov left the Donbas in August 2014, reportedly forced out by Moscow. See, for example, Pavel Kanygin, “Managed Spring,” *Novaya Gazeta Online*, December 8, 2014. By many accounts, Strelkov was a retired Russian intelligence officer who had participated in the taking of Crimea. Nevertheless, a Moscow analyst who knows Ukraine and Strelkov argued before Strelkov’s departure from the Donbas that Strelkov was not a Russian agent, but a private Russian adventurer. He was not the type one would entrust a secret operation to. He was a “reenactor” whose favorite theme was the civil war in Russia. Strelkov always played the Whites. He always thought of what went wrong for the Whites in the civil war after the Bolshevik Revolution. Now Strelkov was putting all of his fantasies and ideas to work and keeping the Ukrainian army tied up at Slovyansk.

Author’s conversations in Moscow, June 2014.

¹⁷³ Neil MacFarquhar, “Putin Hits Pause in Ukraine Crisis amid Skepticism,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2014. See also Michael Kofman, “The Battle for Ukraine: Who Is Winning?” *National Interest*, May 17, 2014, available at <<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-battle-ukraine-who-winning-10484?page=2>>; and Pew Research, Global Attitudes Project, “Despite Concerns about Governance, Ukrainians Want to Remain One Country,” May 8, 2014, available at <www.pewglobal.org/2014/05/08/despite-concerns-about-governance-ukrainians-want-to-remain-one-country/>. Meanwhile, in Moscow, Russian nationalists such as Alexander Dugin were urging Putin to invade Ukraine to save Russia. See Dugin’s blogs on May 26 and 27, 2014, available at <http://vk.com/duginag?w=wall18631635_2856%2Fd3bbaff5b82ea94aa> and <http://vk.com/duginag?w=wall18631635_2872%2Fad83b0c49f38a7e72c>.

¹⁷⁴ Author’s conversations in Moscow, June and September 2014. For excellent early analyses of Putin’s game plan toward Ukraine, see Michael Kofman, “Putin’s Grand Strategy for Ukraine,”

National Interest, April 25, 2014, available at <<http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/putins-grand-strategy-ukraine-10340>>; and Michael Kofman, “Russia Can’t Afford to Lose,” *Kyiv Post*, April 15, 2014, available at <www.kyivpost.com/opinion/op-ed/michael-kofman-russia-cant-afford-to-lose-343541.html?flavour=mobile>.

¹⁷⁵ Author’s conversations in Moscow, June 2014.

¹⁷⁶ See the scrupulous analyses of open-source data done by Bellingcat, including “Origin of the Separatists’ Buk: A Bellingcat Investigation,” November 8, 2014, available at <www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2014/11/08/origin-of-the-separatists-buk-a-bellingcat-investigation/>; the International Investigation Team’s compelling video (including photographs, videos, and phone call transcripts) detailing the Buk-11’s movements and actions to and from Snezhnoye in Ukraine on July 16–18, 2014, in connection with the shootdown of MH 17, posted by *Vedomosti.ru*, March 30, 2015, available at <www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2015/03/30/sledovateli-ischut-svidetelei-peredvizheniya-kompleksa-buk-po-donbassu>; Aleksandr Golts’s discussion of the identification of the retired Russian general in charge of the Buk-11’s movements in Ukraine in “Russia Will Not Be Forgiven for Downed Boeing,” *Yezhednevnyy Zhurnal* (www.ej.ru), April 3, 2015; and “Ukraine: Villagers Say They Saw Missile Just Before Civilian Jet Was Shot Down,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2015. Though unremarked, the downing of MH 17 with a probable surface-to-air missile underscored, to Washington’s credit, what could still easily go wrong were less capable U.S. man-portable air-defense systems to fall into the wrong hands in Syria.

¹⁷⁷ Tatyana Stanovaya, “Does Putin Have an Exit Strategy from the Conflict with the West and Can the Chapter Be Closed,” *Slon.ru*, July 31, 2014, available at <http://slon.ru/russia/est_li_u_putina_exit_strategy-1136088.xhtml>.

¹⁷⁸ Golts, “Russia Will Not Be Forgiven.”

¹⁷⁹ John W. Parker, *Kremlin in Transition*, vol. 1 (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1991), 43–70, 287–302.

¹⁸⁰ Dmitri Trenin, “Welcome to Cold War II,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, March 4, 2014, available at <www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/04/welcome_to_cold_war_ii>; and Vasily Kashin, “Our Generation’s Cold War,” *Vedomosti.ru*, July 31, 2014, available at <www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/news/29673481/holodnaya-vojna-nashego-pokoleniya#ixzz391dh5FfK>.

¹⁸¹ George Packer, “The Quiet German,” *The New Yorker*, December 1, 2014, 46–63, and 57–61 in particular on this point.

¹⁸² Carlotta Gall, “Ukraine Town Bears Scars of Russian Offensive That Turned Tide in Conflict,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2014.

¹⁸³ “Statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the Events in Ukraine,” August 29, 2014, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

¹⁸⁴ David M. Herszenhorn, “Fears Rise as Russian Military Units Pour into Ukraine,” *New York Times*, November 13, 2014.

¹⁸⁵ David M. Herszenhorn, “A Tilt Toward NATO in Ukraine,” *New York Times*, November 28, 2014. On December 23, the Rada voted 303 to 8 in favor of the measure. See David M. Herszenhorn, “Ukraine Vote Takes Nation a Step Closer to NATO,” *New York Times*, December 24, 2014.

¹⁸⁶ The movement itself preferred the all-encompassing Islamic State, or IS. But others also referred to it as ISIL, or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or in Arabic as the *Da’ish*.

¹⁸⁷ Anne Barnard, “Break in Syrian War Brings Brittle Calm,” *New York Times*, April 6, 2014; Anne Barnard, “Homs Emerges as Turning Point in Shaping Syria’s Future,” *New York Times*, April 23, 2014; and Anne Barnard, “Syrian Rebels Agree to Leave a Stronghold,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2014.

¹⁸⁸ Peter Baker and Eric Schmitt, “Many Missteps in Assessment of ISIS Threat,” *New York Times*, September 30, 2014.

¹⁸⁹ Mohammad al-Masri, “Arab Public Attitudes Towards the U.S.” conference presentation on the findings of the Arab Opinion Index. The conference was sponsored by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies and titled “The Arab World and the U.S.: Interests and Concerns in a Changing Environment (An Academic Perspective),” Doha, Qatar, June 14–16, 2014. Zogby polling done in September 2014 across the Middle East found Russia and America both rated poorly for their negative impact on the region, but with Russia doing slightly better than the United States (table 30). Russia, while still rated low, did better than the United States in perceptions of its positive impact on Syria (table 9). See Zogby Research Services, “Today’s Middle East: Pressures and Challenges,” November 2014, available at <www.aaiusa.org/pages/todays-middle-east-pressures-and-challenges>. For more polling on perceptions of Russia in the Middle East, see “Russia’s Global Image Negative Amid Crisis in Ukraine,” Pew Research Center, July 9, 2014, available at <www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/09/russias-global-image-negative-amid-crisis-in-ukraine/>.

¹⁹⁰ Somini Sengupta, “Vote by UN General Assembly Isolates Russia,” *New York Times*, March 28, 2014.

¹⁹¹ In all, 100 countries voted for the resolution, 11 countries voted against, 58 abstained, and 24 were absent. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 68/262, available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_General_Assembly_Resolution_68/262#Voting>.

¹⁹² See, for example, Bahram Amirahmadian, “Ukraine; Russia’s Revenge on the West,” *Sharq Online*, April 9, 2014; Vahid Hajipur, “A Few Words With Mr. Asgarowladi, President of the Iran-China and Iran-Russia Chambers of Commerce and Industries,” *Javan Online*, May 3, 2014; and Ali Vedayè, “The Gap in the International Community,” *Mardom Salari Online*, May 6, 2014.

¹⁹³ For contrasting commentaries in Tehran, see Mohammad Safari, “Formation of an Anti-American Alliance,” *Siyasat-e Ruz Online*, July 20, 2014; and Hoseyn Musavian, “The Need for Cooperation Between Iran and America to Save the Middle East,” *Sharq Online*, August 4, 2014.

¹⁹⁴ Olga Golovanova, interview with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov, “Russia Against ‘Game To Raise Stakes’ at Iran Talks,” *Interfax*, March 20, 2014.

¹⁹⁵ Yelena Chernenko interview with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov, “We Are Dealing With a New Offensive Type of Weapon”; Russian Federation Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov on the Crisis in Russian-U.S. Relations,” *Kommersant Online*, July 4, 2014.

¹⁹⁶ Igor Pankratenko, “Igor Pankratenko: Russia’s ‘Iranian Vector’: Nikolay Patrushev in Tehran,” *Regnum* (Regnum.ru), October 22, 2014.

¹⁹⁷ Seyyed Nematollah Abdolrahimzadeh, “The Approach to Iran-Russia Relations,” *Javan Online*, October 22, 2014.

¹⁹⁸ “Iran Still Demands Some \$4 Billion From Rosoboronexport for Unsupplied S-300 Systems,” *Interfax*, August 20, 2014.

¹⁹⁹ On the decision to cancel the contract, see Parker, *Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program*, 15–17. The author has heard regret and criticism of the decision during many of his visits to Moscow.

²⁰⁰ Author's conversations in Moscow, June 2014.

²⁰¹ On the margins of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia summit in Shanghai in May, the Shanghai Co-operation Organization summit in Dushanbe in September, and the Caspian Sea Littoral States' summit in Astrakhan at the end of the same month.

²⁰² Parker, *Persian Dreams*, 31.

²⁰³ Ibid., 213.

²⁰⁴ N.M. Mamedova, "Cooperation between Russia and Iran: Correlation between Geopolitics and Geo-economy," 51–63, table on 56 on 2000–2013 bilateral trade, in *Russian-Iranian Relations: Issues and Prospects* [Российско-иранские отношения. Проблемы и перспективы], ed. Ye. V. Dunaeva and V. I. Sazhin (Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Oriental Studies, 2015). By comparison, Russia's trade with Israel was \$3.5–\$4 billion in 2013, more than three times the trade with much bigger Iran. Author's conversations in Moscow, February and June 2014.

²⁰⁵ Aleksandr Braterskiy, "Iran That We Are Losing," *Gazeta.ru*, April 2, 2015.

²⁰⁶ Author's conversations in Moscow, February 2015.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., May 2015.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., October 2013, and February, June, and September 2014.

²⁰⁹ Kirill Melnikov and Yelena Chernenko, "For Iranian Oil There Is No Access to Russia. Its Delivery Has Run Into the Problems of Logistics," *Kommersant.ru*, April 4, 2014, available at <www.kommersant.ru/doc/2444589>; "Iran Russia Sign Electricity Deals," Islamic Republic News Agency, April 28, 2014; Yevgeniya Novikova, "Moscow and Tehran Resist Sanctions. Forthcoming Energy Contract Between Russia and Iran Confounds Washington," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta Online*, April 30, 2014; Russian Energy Minister Aleksandr Novak's August 6, 2014, comments on the Russian-Iranian energy memorandum of understanding, available at <http://minenergo.gov.ru/press/min_news/19359.html?print=Y&bitrix_include_areas=Y>; and Andrey Polunin, "Moscow's Oil Torpedo. In Spite of U.S., Russia Plans To Buy 'Black Gold' From Iran" (includes interviews with experts Nikita Maslennikov and Yevgeniy Satanovskiy), *Svobodnaya Pressa* (*svpressa.ru*), August 6, 2014.

²¹⁰ Author's conversations in Moscow, June and September 2014.

²¹¹ "News Conference of Vladimir Putin," *En.Kremlin.ru*, December 18, 2014.

²¹² "Russia, Iran Agree on Construction of 2 New Blocks at Bushehr, Option to Expand to 4," *Interfax*, November 11, 2014. On Russia's nuclear power plant sales to the Middle East, see Jonathan Saunders, "Russia's nuclear diplomacy," *Al-Monitor*, January 28, 2015, available at <www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/russia-nuclear-diplomacy.html>.

²¹³ For a Russian discussion of the pros and cons as negotiations entered the final stages, see Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russia Weighs Nuclear Cooperation with Iran," *The Gulf States Newsletter* 38, no. 980 (October 30, 2014), 9–11. For a jaundiced Iranian view of the new contract, see the unattributed commentary "How Long Will the Russians Take to Build a Power Plant for Iran This Time?" *Tabnak* (www.tabnak.ir), November 17, 2014.

²¹⁴ Fedor Lukyanov, "Doubtful Role," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta Online*, December 10, 2014.

²¹⁵This view is reciprocated in some quarters in Tehran. See, for example, the interview with “professor of international relations” Ali Khorram, “Tehran-Moscow Relations Are Friendly Not Strategic,” *Sharq Online*, January 13, 2015.

²¹⁶Author’s conversations in Moscow, June and September 2014.

²¹⁷Ibid., February 2015.

²¹⁸Ibid.

²¹⁹“EU Hails ‘Serious’ Iran Nuclear Talks, Says New Round in February,” Agence France-Presse, January 18, 2015.

²²⁰Igor Sergeyev visited Tehran in early December 2000. See Parker, *Persian Dreams*, 144–146, 211–212, on that visit as well as the debate over arms sales to Iran at the time that Pukhov participated in.

²²¹“Iranian Leader’s Senior Adviser Discusses Nuclear Talks With Russian President in Moscow,” Fars News Agency, January 28, 2015.

²²²“Defense Minister’s Visit May Remove Problems in Russia-Iran Arms Trade—Analyst,” *Interfax*, January 15, 2015.

²²³Matthew Bodner, “Mistrust Dogs Russia-Iran Arms Talks as Shoigu Heads for Tehran,” *Moscow Times Online*, January 19, 2015, available at <www.themoscowtimes.com/article/514581.html>.

²²⁴“Defense Ministers Says Iran, Russia To Find Solution for S-300 Missile Deal,” *Tasnim* (tasnimnews.com), January 20, 2015.

²²⁵Ivan Safronov and Yelena Chernenko, “Surface-To-Air Package. Russia Offers Iran the Antey-2500 Instead of the S-300s That Were Subject to Sanctions,” *Kommersant Online*, February 24, 2015.

²²⁶Department of State, “Parameters for a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action Regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Nuclear Program,” Media Note, Office of the Spokesperson, Washington, DC, April 2, 2015, available at <www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/04/240170.htm>; “Joint Statement by EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif Switzerland,” *Europa* (www.europa.eu), April 2, 2015; and “Press release by the Russian Foreign Ministry following talks in Lausanne between the foreign ministers from the ‘group of six’ [P5+1] and Iran on the issue of settling the situation around the Iranian nuclear program,” April 2, 2015, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

²²⁷“Russia ready to sell air defense systems to Iran if new deal signed—source,” *Interfax*, April 3, 2015; and “Russia Will Sell S-300 Missile Systems to Iran if Sanctions Lifted—Experts,” *RIA Novosti*, April 3, 2015.

²²⁸See, for example, “Russia explores possible cooperation with Iran in Fordow, composition of Arak JV unclear—Ryabkov,” *Interfax*, April 3, 2015; Aleksandr Braterskiy, “Iran That We Are Losing,” *Gazeta.ru*, April 2, 2015; “Russia sees Iranian market as extremely promising after sanctions lifted—minister,” *Interfax*, April 4, 2015; “Following Lausanne deal, Russia to face growing competition in trade with Tehran—expert,” *Interfax*, April 3, 2015; and “Russia May Supply Iran With New Weapons After Sanctions Lift—Tech Corporation,” *RIA Novosti*, April 7, 2015. See also the thoughtful analysis by Paul J. Saunders, “Russia eyes Iranian arms deal after Lausanne,” *Al-Monitor*, April 6, 2015, available at <www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/iran-s300-sale.html>.

²²⁹Mark Mazzetti and Helene Cooper, “Sale of U.S. Arms Fuels the Wars of Arab States,” *New York Times*, April 19, 2015; and Karoun Demirjian, “Russia’s preemptive strike as Iran warms to West,” *Washington Post*, April 19, 2015.

²³⁰ “Amendment to Executive Order on measures for implementing UN Security Council Resolution No. 1929,” *En.Kremlin.ru*, April 14, 2015. According to this, the executive order lifts the ban on transit of the S-300 air defense missile systems via Russian Federation territory (including by air), export from the Russian Federation to the Islamic Republic of Iran, and transfer of the S-300 to the Islamic Republic of Iran outside the Russian Federation’s territory, using ships or aircraft flying the Russian Federation flag. See also “Statement by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the Russian President’s decision to lift the ban on selling S-300 surface-to-air missile systems to Iran,” April 13, 2015, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

²³¹ “Iranian Security Chief: Russia Decree on S-300 Missile System Putin’s ‘Good Will,’” Islamic Republic News Agency, April 13, 2015.

²³² Parker, *Persian Dreams*, 213.

²³³ “Russia, Iran to develop cooperation in sphere of regional security—Iranian defense minister,” *Interfax*, April 17, 2015.

²³⁴ For speculation to the contrary, see Mark Katz, “Does Putin Want to Derail the Iranian Nuclear Negotiations?” April 13, 2015, available at <<https://katzeyevview.wordpress.com/2015/04/13/does-putin-want-to-derail-the-iranian-nuclear-negotiations/>>.

²³⁵ Dmitri Trenin, “Russia’s Missile Moves Explained: The S-300 Challenge,” *The National Interest*, April 15, 2015.

²³⁶ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with Rossiya Segodnya,” April 8, 2015, accessed at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

²³⁷ “Russian Energy Minister Denies Existence of Oil for Goods Deal with Iran,” *RIA Novosti*, April 15, 2015; and “Program with Iran not envisaging Iranian oil exports to Russia—Novak,” *Interfax*, April 15, 2015.

²³⁸ Parker, *Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program*, 15–17.

²³⁹ Author’s conversations in Moscow, May 2015.

²⁴⁰ After much back-and-forth speculation in the press, an unnamed “high-ranking source” certainly had it right in June 2015 when he stated, “We hope that the issue concerning this lawsuit and the signing of a new contract . . . will be resolved before the end of the year.” See “No final decision yet on deliveries of Russian missile systems to Iran—source,” *Interfax*, June 23, 2015.

²⁴¹ Irina Zvyagelskaya, *The Middle East Clinch: Conflict in the Middle East and Russian Policy* [Ближневосточный клинч: Конфликт на Ближнем Востоке и политика России] (Moscow: Aspect Press, 2014), 126–127.

²⁴² Herb Keinon, “Israel Not About to Enter Russia, Ukraine Fray, FM Lieberman Says,” *Jerusalem Post Online*, April 22, 2014.

²⁴³ “Israeli Diplomats Nix Sale of Drones to Ukraine—Report,” *Times of Israel*, September 15, 2014, available at <www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-diplomats-nix-drone-sale-to-ukraine-report/>.

²⁴⁴ “Russian S-300 Missiles Made for Syria Could Be Sold Elsewhere—Maker,” *Interfax*, August 15, 2014.

²⁴⁵ See “Commentary of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Information and Press Department about the Situation around Gaza,” July 25, 2014, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>. A former Israeli ambassador to Ukraine speculated that a possible explanation for Russia’s gentle comments

on the Gaza conflict was Israel's neutral stance on the Ukrainian crisis. See Tzvi Magen and Olena Bagno-Moldavsky, "Ukraine and Operation Protective Edge: Two Sides to Russia's Foreign Policy Coin," *Institute for National Security Studies*, August 14, 2014.

²⁴⁶ Author's conversations in Moscow, September 2014.

²⁴⁷ Gil Ronen, "PM: Russian Supply of S-300 Missile System to Iran 'Very Grave,'" *Arutz Sheva* (www.israelnationalnews.com), April 19, 2015.

²⁴⁸ Sergey Brilev interview of Putin, *The News on Saturday*, Rossiya 1 Television, April 18, 2015, available at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=Io09P7P-GF8>.

²⁴⁹ Author's conversations in Moscow, May 2015.

²⁵⁰ For a chronology of the rise of ISIL, see Peter Baker and Eric Schmitt, "Many Missteps in Assessment of ISIS Threat," *New York Times*, September 30, 2014.

²⁵¹ "ISIS Vows Dethroning Putin for His Support to Syria," *Lebanese National News Agency Online*, September 4, 2014.

²⁵² Karen DeYoung and Anne Gearan, "Obama Sending 300 Advisers to Bolster Iraq against Rebels," *Washington Post*, June 20, 2014; and Mark Landler and Michael R. Gordon, "Obama Orders 300 Advisers to Iraq," *New York Times*, June 20, 2014.

²⁵³ Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, "Obama Hails Progress Made Against Islamic State," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2014.

²⁵⁴ Karen DeYoung, "Obama: 'We Don't Have a Strategy Yet' on Syria," *Washington Post*, August 29, 2014. In the same August 28 press conference, President Obama declared that the United States might increase sanctions against Russia but would not intervene militarily in Ukraine.

²⁵⁵ "Statement by the President on Iraq," The White House, June 13, 2014, available at <www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/13/statement-president-iraq>.

²⁵⁶ Rod Norland, "Russian Jets and Experts Sent to Iraq to Aid Army," *New York Times*, June 30, 2014; and Andrey Frolov, "Results of Military-Technical Cooperation between Russia and Foreign States in 2014," *Arms Exports* [Экспорт вооружений] 6, no. 115 (November–December 2014), 4, 9. In Moscow, some reportedly stated that Iran had sent pilots for the SU-25s; if so, one expert observer joked, it was an Iranian "joint venture" with Russia. Author's conversations in Moscow, May 2015. Iran was also quick off the mark in rushing aid to Iraq. Tehran's help was more consequential than that of Moscow and thus undoubtedly even more appreciated in Baghdad. See Tim Arango and Thomas Erdbrink, "U.S. and Iran Both Attack ISIS, But Try Not to Look Like Allies," *New York Times*, December 4, 2014; and Middy Ryan and Loveday Morris, "In Iraq, a Shared Goal for U.S., Iran," *Washington Post*, December 28, 2014.

²⁵⁷ "Russian Sale of Weapons Worth over \$1 bln to Iraq—Newspaper," *Interfax*, July 30, 2014; and "Military, Technical Cooperation Between Russia, Iraq Developing Successfully—Shoigu," *Interfax*, July 24, 2014. By September 2014, according to a Moscow expert, Russian arms transfers to Iraq were considerable, including what was now put at some \$1.5 billion in new contracts that summer. This latest tranche was mostly for ground weapons: a "huge" number of artillery pieces and ammunition, including 152mm howitzers and thermobaric multiple rocket launching systems; and both Buratino ("Pinocchio") and its Solntsepog ("Scorching Sun") upgrade. These weapons were sent to Iraq on an urgent basis. The flamethrowers proved effective in the Caucasus, noted another Russian area expert, where insurgents

ran away whenever Buratinos advanced. In addition, there were at least several dozen Russian technicians in Iraq. Author's conversations in Moscow, September 2014. Judging by videos of the Buratino system available on YouTube, they are indeed fearful.

²⁵⁸ An Iraqi cabinet member put the total of purchases of Russian weapons at \$5–\$7 billion. This was said to include “weapons, armored vehicles, tanks, and Mi-35M attack helicopters” to be used in the campaign against ISIL. See “Moscow Appeals Baghdad With Modern Weapons on Future Payment-Basis,” *Al-Arabi al-Jadid Online*, January 20, 2015.

²⁵⁹ “Russia Plans to Supply Arms Worth ‘Hundreds of Millions’ to Iraq—Putin’s Aide,” *RIA Novosti*, June 2, 2015; and “Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi Says Sanctions on Russia, Iran Blocking Arms Purchases,” *Agence France-Presse*, June 2, 2015.

²⁶⁰ Frolov, “Results . . . 2014,” 4–5.

²⁶¹ Darya Tsilyurik-Frants, “Russia and United States Strengthen Iraq’s Military Might. Baghdad Striving Not to Let Weapons Fall into Jihadist Hands,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta Online*, May 22, 2015.

²⁶² Author’s conversations in Moscow, May 2015.

²⁶³ “Lukoil Ships First Cost Oil from West Qurna 2 in Iraq,” *Interfax*, August 19, 2014.

²⁶⁴ Also see “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and responses to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of the Republic of Iraq Ibrahim al-Jaafari, Moscow, March 19, 2015,” March 20, 2015, available at <http://archive.mid.ru//brp_4.nsf/main_eng>. Lavrov put annual trade with Iraq at almost \$2 billion.

²⁶⁵ “Russia Outlaws Number of Islamic Organizations as Terrorist,” *Interfax*, February 14, 2003.

²⁶⁶ Sabri Abd-al-Hafiz Hasanayn, “A Syrian Oppositionist Says Mursi Reneged on His Promises and Put His Hand in the Hands of the Syrian People’s Enemies. Syrian Oppositionist Jabr al-Shufi Disapproved of the Close Relations that Egyptian President Muhammad Mursi Is Establishing with Iran, Russia, and China, Enemies of the Syrian People, After He Previously Announced that He Refuses to Shake Hands With Any Figure Who Supports Bashar al-Assad,” *Ilaf* (www.elaph.com), April 23–24, 2013.

²⁶⁷ “Egypt Urges Russia to Join Aswan HPP Project,” *Interfax*, April 22, 2013.

²⁶⁸ Michael R. Gordon and Mark Landler, “In Crackdown Response, U.S. Temporarily Freezes Some Military Aid to Egypt,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2013. The United States would not begin releasing the helicopters until fall 2014. See “Delivery of Helicopters Shows Mending of U.S.-Egypt Ties,” *New York Times*, December 21, 2014.

²⁶⁹ Moscow spokesmen began to parse their references to the Muslim Brotherhood quite carefully. For example, Mikhail Margelov, who was then head of the Federation Council’s International Affairs Committee, claimed that the Sisi regime had declared war on Islamist terrorists alone and not on the Muslim Brotherhood as a whole. See “Sisi Victory in Egypt Presidential Poll Means Closer Ties with Russia—Lawmaker,” *Interfax*, May 29, 2014.

²⁷⁰ Author’s conversations in Moscow, September 2014.

²⁷¹ One billion dollars, according to Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies. See Yevgeniya Novikova, “Cairo Buys Russian Arms. Saudi Arabia May Settle Rosoboronexport’s Account on Egypt’s Behalf,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta Online*, November 15, 2013. Two billion dollars, according to retired General Hussam Sweilem, an Egyptian military expert, in an interview on the Voice of Russia radio, who also stated transfers would begin in mid-2014 and would be

paid for by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. See “Russia to Start Arms Supplies to Egypt in mid-2014—Expert,” *Interfax*, February 17, 2014.

²⁷² David D. Kirkpatrick, “Putin Encourages Egyptian’s Presidential Ambitions,” *New York Times*, February 14, 2014.

²⁷³ Russia’s “strategic partnership” with Egypt was formalized in June 2009, during then-President Medvedev’s visit to Cairo. See Yelena Suponina, “Russian-Egyptian Relations Said To Reach ‘New Level’ With Medvedev Cairo Trip,” *Vremya Novostey Online*, June 24, 2009.

²⁷⁴ “Speech by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, and His Answers to Questions from the Mass Media during the Press Conference Summarizing the Results of the Negotiations Between the Russian and the Egyptian Foreign and Defense Ministers, Moscow, February 13, 2014,” February 18, 2014, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

²⁷⁵ “Russia Is Planning to Renew Its Military Presence in Egypt,” *Izvestiya Online*, April 29, 2014.

²⁷⁶ “Text of a Press Statement by Russian President Vladimir Putin Following Russian-Egyptian Talks on 12 August 2014,” *En.Kremlin.ru*, August 12, 2014.

²⁷⁷ Amr Abd-al-Samí, “Egyptian-Russian Messages to the United States,” *Al-Ahram*, August 14, 2014.

²⁷⁸ “Jumping, Not Walking, out of Egypt’s Crisis: El-Sisi Interview, Part 2,” *Ahram Online*, May 7, 2014, available at <<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/100663/Egypt/Politics-/Jumping,-not-walking,-out-of-Egypt-s-crisis-ElSisi-.aspx>>.

²⁷⁹ “V for Vindication,” *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, October 2, 2014.

²⁸⁰ Author’s conversations in Moscow, June 2014.

²⁸¹ Anton Mardasov, “A Base in the Land of the Pharaohs. Will Russia Revive Its Military Presence in Egypt?” *Svobodnaya Pressa* (svpressa.ru), August 13, 2014.

²⁸² Yevgeniya Novikova, “Cairo Buys Russian Arms. Saudi Arabia May Settle Rosoboronexport’s Account on Egypt’s Behalf,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta Online*, November 15, 2013.

²⁸³ “Egypt to Get Arms Worth \$3.5 Bln from Russia under Initialed Deals,” *Interfax*, September 17, 2014.

²⁸⁴ Frolov, “Results . . . 2014,” 3, 6–7, 11.

²⁸⁵ Mardasov.

²⁸⁶ “Lavrov: Moscow-Cairo Cooperation Is Not Meant to Spite U.S.,” *Interfax*, November 19, 2013. However, Deputy Defense Minister Anatoliy Antonov later stated that Russia was exploring the establishment of naval “support facilities” in several countries in the Middle East. See “Russia Seeking Naval Support Facilities in Middle East—Senior Official,” *Interfax-AVN Online*, May 19, 2014.

²⁸⁷ “Russian-Egyptian deal envisions construction of 4-unit NPP,” *Interfax*, February 11, 2015.

²⁸⁸ Vitaly Naumkin, “Russia and Egypt’s ‘New Partnership,’” *Al-Monitor*, February 11, 2015, available at <www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/moscow-cairo-relations-sisi-putin-egypt-visit.html>.

²⁸⁹ “Russian president makes press statement after Egypt talks—Kremlin text,” *En.Kremlin.ru*, February 10, 2015.

²⁹⁰ “Press Conference of Vladimir Putin and the President of Egypt,” February 10, 2015, available at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=AP5zLJJDfAE>.

²⁹¹ Nicola Clark, “Egypt to Purchase Fighter Jets and a Warship From France,” *New York Times*, February 13, 2015.

²⁹² “Egypt Seeks To ‘Diversify’ Weapon Providers: Experts,” *Daily News Egypt Online*, February 16, 2015.

²⁹³ See the roundup of speculation on this score in Naumkin, “Russia and Egypt’s ‘New Partnership’”; and Ayah Aman, “Gulf states to cut aid to Egypt,” *Al-Monitor*, February 17, 2015, available at <www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/egypt-gulf-aid-economy-conference.html>.

²⁹⁴ Author’s conversations in Moscow, February 2015.

²⁹⁵ Ayah Aman, “Egypt acts as middleman for Russia-Libya arms deal,” *Al-Monitor*, February 19, 2015, available at <www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/egypt-efforts-libya-army-russia-weapons.html>; and “Aircraft From Al-Sisi to Haftar, and Egyptian Army Soldiers Killed in Libya,” *Al-Arabi al-Jadid Online*, March 19, 2015.

²⁹⁶ “EU sanctions obstructing Russia-Lebanon arms deal: report,” *Daily Star Online*, March 24, 2015. For details on Lebanon’s purchases, see Sa’id Tanyos, “Lebanon Bolsters Its Security with Russian Weapons Paid for by a Saudi Grant,” *Al-Jazirah Online*, February 22, 2015.

²⁹⁷ “Russia, Egypt Sign Military Cooperation Agreement,” *RIA Novosti*, March 4, 2015.

²⁹⁸ “Russia starts deliveries of Antey-2500 missile systems to Egypt—source,” *Interfax*, March 5, 2015. At the end of the month, the United States fully lifted its hold on \$1.3 billion in military assistance to Egypt, imposed in October 2013. A partial lift in April 2014 had allowed the transfer of Apache helicopters to go forward. Now F-16 fighter jets, Harpoon missiles, and Abrams M1A1 tank kits could follow. See Missy Ryan, “Obama Administration Ends Hold on U.S. Military Aid to Egypt,” *Washington Post*, April 1, 2015.

²⁹⁹ According to *Interfax* citing the *Vedomosti* newspaper. See “Russia, Egypt agree on major contract for fighter aircraft supply—paper,” *Interfax*, May 25, 2015.

³⁰⁰ Author’s conversations in Moscow, May 2015.

³⁰¹ Author’s conversations in Moscow, September 2014.

³⁰² For the chronology of these U.S.-Iranian contacts, see Bradley Klapper, Matthew Lee, and Julie Pace, “Secret U.S.-Iran Talks Set Stage for Nuke Deal,” Associated Press, November 24, 2014, available at <<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/secret-us-iran-talks-set-stage-nuke-deal>>. The P5+1 consists of UN Security Council permanent members: the United States, Russia, Britain, France, and China, plus Germany.

³⁰³ “Speech by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, and His Answer to the Question from the Mass Media after His Visit to Saudi Arabia, Jeddah, 21 January 2014,” June 23, 2014, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

³⁰⁴ Some of the speculation that follows has points in common with the thoughts offered in a blog posted by the anonymous author “Crimson Alter” in “Lavrov Tames Tehran,” July 5, 2014, available at <<http://aftershock-1.livejournal.com/2400573.html>> and <<http://politrusia.com/world/lavrov-ukroshchaet-tegeran-716/>>.

³⁰⁵ “Russian PM Vladimir Putin Meets With Experts in Sarov to Discuss Global Threat,” February 24, 2012, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

³⁰⁶ “Putin April 17, 2014, on Saudi Friends and Close Relations,” *Interfax*, April 17, 2014.

³⁰⁷ Author's conversations in Moscow, June 2014.

³⁰⁸ Elsewhere, on this point, see Simon Henderson, "Saudi Arabia's Family Feud," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 7, 2014, available at <<http://washin.st/TYZS4X>>, and other Henderson analyses of Saudi domestic and foreign policy.

³⁰⁹ Supporting this point, there were even some intriguing Saudi-Iranian contacts. See Alex Vatanka, "Iran and Saudi Arabia: Detente on the Horizon?" *The National Interest*, September 8, 2014, available at <<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/iran-saudi-arabia-detente-the-horizon-11223>>.

³¹⁰ Author's conversations in Moscow, June 2014.

³¹¹ Ibid., June and September 2014.

³¹² Ibid., June 2014.

³¹³ Ibid., September 2014. On the dissension in the Middle East over Obama's resistance to boots on the ground, see Anne Barnard, "Conflicting Policies on Syria and Islamic State Erode U.S. Standing in Mideast," *New York Times*, November 28, 2014. On Obama's explication of U.S. strategy against ISIL, see Mark Landler, "Obama Calls for Sustained Drive to Rout Militants," *New York Times*, September 11, 2014.

³¹⁴ "Opening Remarks and Answers to Media Questions by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Following Talks with Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal Moscow, 21 November 2014," November 22, 2014, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>; and "Joint Press Statement Issued by Sergei V. Lavrov, Foreign Minister of the Russia, and His Royal Highness Prince Saud al-Faisal, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," November 21, 2014, accessed at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

³¹⁵ "Prince Bandar Bin-Sultan's Most Significant Achievement in Moscow: Establishment of Saudi Intelligence Bureau To Hunt Down Chechnyans," *Ra'y al-Yawm* (www.raialyoum.com), January 4, 2014.

³¹⁶ "Text of Russian President Vladimir Putin's Interview to TASS. The private Russian company Lukoil, incidentally, has been active in Saudi Arabia since at least 2009.

³¹⁷ "News Conference of Vladimir Putin," *En.Kremlin.ru*, December 18, 2014.

³¹⁸ Douglas Martin and Ben Hubbard, "King Abdullah, Who Reshaped His Country Amid Arab Revolts, Dies," *New York Times*, January 23, 2015; and Ben Hubbard, "Salman Ascends Throne to Become Saudi King," *New York Times*, January 23, 2015.

³¹⁹ "Press release on antiterrorist consultations with Arabia," January 20, 2015, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

³²⁰ Ben Hubbard and David D. Kirkpatrick, "Saudi Succession Hinting at Shift in Foreign Role," *New York Times*, January 27, 2015.

³²¹ David Ottaway, *Mohammed bin Nayef: Washington's New Favorite Saudi Prince*, Viewpoints, No. 70 (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, January 2015), available at <www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/mohammed-bin-nayef-washington%E2%80%99s-new-favorite-saudi-prince>; Ben Hubbard and David D. Kirkpatrick, "Saudi Succession Hinting at Shift in Foreign Role," *New York Times*, January 27, 2015.

³²² Author's conversations in Moscow, May 2015.

³²³ "Crown Prince Receives Russian Ambassador," *SPA Online*, February 22, 2015.

³²⁴ "Russia, Saudi Arabia discuss Yemen's impasse," *SABA* (www.sabanews.net/en), March 24, 2015.

³²⁵ “Comment by the Foreign Ministry on the Situation in Yemen,” March 26, 2015, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

³²⁶ See, for example, “Saudi Arabia may suffer defeat in Yemen—Russian expert [Leonid Isayev],” *Interfax*, March 26, 2015; “Yemen may break up in case of military intervention—expert [Yelena Suponina],” *Interfax*, March 26, 2015; and Mikhail Leontyev on “Odnako,” Channel One TV, March 31, 2015, available at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fw2h75w64tg>.

³²⁷ See the comments by Mikhail Aleksandrov in Andrey Polunin, “Why Should Russia Help the Shiites at War With Saudi Arabia?” *Svobodnaya Pressa*, March 29, 2015.

³²⁸ “Minister of Defense Meets Russian Ambassador to the Kingdom,” *SPA Online*, March 28, 2015.

³²⁹ “Minister of Defense Receives Russian Ambassador to the Kingdom,” *SPA Online*, April 15, 2015.

³³⁰ See, for example, Olga Kuznetsova and Yelena Chernenko, “Binding the Arab World With a Single Army. Joint Armed Forces Thrown Into the Struggle Against Regional Threats,” *Kommersant Online*, March 30, 2015; and “Al-Asad and Putin Strain Saudi Relationship With Al-Sisi,” *Al-Arabi al-Jadid Online* (www.alaraby.co.uk/portal), April 1, 2015.

³³¹ Russia had been an early proponent of peace talks in Yemen. Beginning as early as January 21, it called for negotiations to end the mounting crisis. See “Russia, Turkey call for peaceful solutions to Yemen’s crisis,” *SABA*, January 22, 2015. For Putin’s greetings to the Arab League summit, see “Putin insists on settling crises in Syria, Libya, Yemen based on intl law principles,” *Interfax*, March 30, 2015. For Foreign Minister Prince Saud’s critical intervention, see “Al-Faysal: The Saudi Support for Al-Asad’s Regime Is a Major Part of the Disasters Which Face the Syrian People. The Saudi Foreign Minister Responds to Putin’s Message to Sharm al-Shaykh’s Summit,” *Al-Sharq al-Awsat Online*, March 30, 2015.

³³² “UN Security Council should denounce violence in Yemen without taking sides—Lavrov,” *Interfax*, April 2, 2015; “Russia, Red Cross Seek Halt to Fighting in Yemen,” *Washington Post*, April 5, 2015; and “Russia denies accusation it is arming Yemen rebels,” April 5, 2015, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

³³³ “On a telephone conversation between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia Sa’ud al-Faysal,” April 6, 2015, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

³³⁴ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with Rossiya Segodnya,” April 8, 2015, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

³³⁵ Hugh Naylor, “UN panel bans arms to Yemeni rebels,” *Washington Post*, April 15, 2015.

³³⁶ “Russian president, Saudi king discuss situation in Yemen, other issues by phone,” *Interfax*, April 20, 2015.

³³⁷ Kareem Fahim and Mark Mazzetti, “Saudis Announce Halt to Bombing of Yemen Rebels,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2015; and Karen DeYoung and Ali Al-Mujahed, “Saudi Arabia Launches New Strikes in Yemen,” *Washington Post*, April 23, 2015.

³³⁸ Ben Hubbard, “Saudi King Changes Line of Succession,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2015.

³³⁹ Author’s conversations in Moscow, May 2015.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁴¹ “On the Russian president’s special representative on the Middle East and African countries, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister M.L. Bogdanov’s working trip to Saudi Arabia,” May 27, 2015, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

³⁴² Interview with Abdulrahman Ibrahim al-Rassi, “Saudi Ambassador: There Is No Such Thing As Total Agreement Even Between Brothers,” *RIA Novosti*, May 22, 2015.

³⁴³ See, for example, Simon Henderson, “Riyadh Looks to Moscow,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 17, 2015, available at <<http://washin.st/1Pi1Xs>>.

³⁴⁴ Author’s conversations in Moscow, June and September 2014.

³⁴⁵ Alison Smale and Michael D. Shear, “U.S. and Allies Put Russia Out of Group of 8,” *New York Times*, March 25, 2014.

³⁴⁶ Author’s conversation in Moscow, June 2014.

³⁴⁷ Another Middle East expert in Moscow around this time commented that Russian Jews were taken in by this propaganda, but might now (September 2014) be beginning to see the light. Author’s conversation in Moscow, September 2014.

³⁴⁸ Author’s conversations in Moscow, September 2014. Several experts underscored this last point in separate conversations around this same time. In fact, the Russian Foreign Ministry had merely expressed “growing concern” after the Israeli army shelled a UN agency school in Bayt Hanum on July 24. See “Commentary of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Information and Press Department about the Situation around Gaza,” July 25, 2014, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

³⁴⁹ As for Turkey, Ankara was sensitive to discrimination against Crimea’s indigenous Muslim Tatars by local ethnic Russians. Putin in turn dealt gingerly and at length with the subject given its potential repercussions across the Middle East and especially in Turkey. With bilateral trade reaching \$33 billion a year, and Erdogan and Putin aspiring to push this to \$100 billion a year, the two leaders seemed determined not to let differences over Syria and Crimea disrupt economic ties. A member of NATO but not the EU, Turkey demonstrably refrained from sanctioning Russia over Ukraine. Moreover, ignoring Western efforts to isolate Putin, Erdogan invited the Russian leader to Ankara for a state visit on December 1. There Putin announced that Russia would redirect the \$22 billion South Stream gas pipeline project under the Black Sea from landfall in Bulgaria to Turkey. Turkey thus joined the rolls of countries in the wider Middle East region benefiting at least in a material way from the heightened tensions between Russia and the West over Ukraine and offering Putin a bit of an escape hatch from Western sanctions and diplomatic pressures. See “Turkey Says Russia Ready to Improve Rights of Crimean Tatars—Russian President Putin in Visit to Turkey as He and Turkish President Erdogan Hold Joint Press Conference Monday on Bilateral Relations and Crises in Ukraine and Syria,” *Anadolu Agency Online*, December 1, 2014; “Text of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s Remarks at a News Conference Following His State Visit to Turkey on 1 December,” *En.Kremlin.ru*, December 2, 2014; Andrew Roth, “Putin, in Defeat, Diverts Pipeline,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2014; and Jim Yardley and Jo Becker, “How Putin Forged a Pipeline Deal That Derailed,” *New York Times*, December 31, 2014.

³⁵⁰ Author’s conversations in Moscow, June 2014.

³⁵¹ Vitaly Naumkin, “The Kremlin’s Unexpected Decisions,” *Al-Monitor*, April 23, 2015, available at <www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/kremlin-unexpected-syria-iran-yemen-israel-decisions.html>.

³⁵² Dmitri Trenin, “Russia’s Missile Moves Explained: The S-300 Challenge,” *The National Interest*, April 15, 2015.

³⁵³ Author’s conversation in Moscow, February 2015.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., September 2014.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., September 2014, and February and May 2015. On these themes, see Dmitri Trenin, *The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Moscow Center, July 9, 2014), available at <<http://carnegie.ru/2014/07/09/ukraine-crisis-and-resumption-of-great-power-rivalry/hfgs#>>.

³⁵⁶ Author's conversations in Moscow, September 2014.

³⁵⁷ "Conference of Russian Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives, 1 July 2014, Moscow," *En.Kremlin.ru*, July 2, 2014. For an exhaustive analysis of the contradictions in Putin's speech and current Russian foreign policy, see the unsigned editorial, "Contradictions of Speech. What, In President's Opinion, Will Happen In Foreign Policy In Coming Years," *Gazeta.ru*, July 1, 2014 available at <www.gazeta.ru/comments/2014/07/01_e_6093657.shtml>.

³⁵⁸ See, for example, Ahmed Eleiba, "What does Russia mean to Egypt?" *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, May 14, 2015.

³⁵⁹ "Russia and Egypt will work for the benefit of two countries through joint efforts—Putin," *Interfax*, May 9, 2015.

³⁶⁰ Author's conversations in Moscow, May 2015. These well-known experts saw Moscow as still interested in good relations with the United States and the West and under no illusions about China. For Russia, in fact, the gains from the emerging relationship with China did not compensate for the losses from the broken connections with Europe. Russia and China had been working on building ties for a long time, but the Ukrainian crisis had accelerated and pushed the dynamic much further.

³⁶¹ For a still photograph, see "President Putin and visiting international leaders attend Victory Day celebrations in Moscow, May 9, 2015 xin.jpg (900×552)," *Al Jazeera*, May 9, 2015, available at <<http://aljazeera.info/images/2015/May/10%20p/President%20Putin%20and%20visiting%20international%20leaders%20attend%20Victory%20Day%20celebrations%20in%20Moscow,%20May%209,%202015%20xin.jpg>>. For video, see "#Victory70: Largest May 9 parade in Russian and Soviet history since WW2 (FULL VIDEO)—YouTube," *Russia Today*, available at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPCXyo-3L8>. The length of this video is 1:31:15; a clear pan of Putin et al. is at the 33:10 mark.

³⁶² Interview by Nikolay Dolgopolov and Yevgeniy Shestakov, "Business Breakfast: Major Note," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta Online*, May 18, 2015.

³⁶³ Author's conversations in Moscow, June 2014 and May 2015.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., September 2014. On this theme, see also Nikolay Surkov, "Russia Will Not Fight with the USA for the Arab World," *Al-Arabi al-Jadeed*, August 10, 2014, available at <www.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/7e65d03b-d01c-4a00-88a0-b5ec9e8ea278>. See also Nikolay Surkov, "Israel Is the Most Important in Moscow from the Arab World," *Al-Arabi al-Jadeed*, August 10, 2014, available at <www.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/f2e1464d-f6d9-4c66-9c3f-613b3b1ea6b6>.

³⁶⁵ Author's conversations in Moscow, September 2014.

³⁶⁶ Eugene B. Rumer, *Dangerous Drift: Russia's Middle East Policy* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), xi–xii.

³⁶⁷ Tatyana Stanovaya, "Putin's Era: Start," *Slon* (slon.ru), June 16, 2014.

³⁶⁸ Author's conversations in Moscow, June 2014. By the end of the year, Black Sea Fleet Commander Admiral Aleksandr Vitko was touting the reestablishment of the Crimean naval base. See Pavel

Zavolokin, “Crimean Naval Base: A Revival of What Was Lost,” *Krasnaya Zvezda Online*, December 6, 2014.

³⁶⁹ Trenin, “The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry.”

³⁷⁰ Aleksey Nikolsky, “Russian Naval Presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Problem of Projected Naval Basing,” *Moscow Defense Brief* 40, no. 2 (2014), 5–8, 8.

³⁷¹ Author’s conversations in Moscow, February and July 2012. For a devastating critique of Russian naval forces in the Mediterranean, see Sergey Ishchenko, “Rapid Jump-Off Squadron. Why the Pentagon Does Not Regard Our Warships in the Mediterranean as a Factor in the War,” *Svobodnaya Pressa* (svpressa.ru), September 24, 2014.

³⁷² See the interview of Asad by Konstantin Volkov, “We Will Not Be Broken. Bashir Al-Asad: A Russian Presence in Various Regions of the World Is Essential In Order To Maintain the Balance of Power,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta Online*, March 27, 2015. For several Russian reactions, see “Russia not planning to have fully-fledged naval base in Syria’s Tartus so far—source,” *Interfax*, March 27, 2015; and “Federation Council: Russia won’t deploy Navy base in Tartous,” *Interfax*, March 27, 2015.

³⁷³ Author’s conversation in Moscow, May 2015.

³⁷⁴ “China, Russia End Joint Naval Exercises,” *Jiefangjun Bao Online*, May 22, 2015; and “Russia-China navy exercise ends successfully in Mediterranean—ministry,” *Interfax*, May 21, 2015.

³⁷⁵ “Russia and Egypt hold joint naval exercise,” *Al-Masry Al-Youm Online*, June 6, 2015; “Russia, Egypt coordinate Friendship Bridge 2015 naval drills plan,” *Interfax*, June 8, 2015; and “Russia-Egypt to hold first-ever naval exercise,” *Interfax*, June 8, 2015.

³⁷⁶ Author’s conversations in Moscow, May 2015.

³⁷⁷ Mark Galeotti, “Russia Is Punching Above Its Weight,” *Moscow Times Online*, July 1, 2014, available at <www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/russia-is-punching-above-its-weight/502810.html?utm_source=Active+Subscribers&utm_campaign=fde3f6cf71-MR_070214&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_35c49cbd51-fde3f6cf71-62626989>.

³⁷⁸ Darya Tsilyurik-Frants, “Fifth Column of Radical Islamists. Middle Eastern Terrorists are Driving a Wedge Between Russia’s Slavic and Muslim Population,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta Online*, May 26, 2015.

³⁷⁹ Author’s conversations in Moscow, September 2014.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ “Russian Pundits Offer Mixed Views on Nature of 4 December Grozny Attack,” *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (www.kavkaz-uzel.ru), December 4, 2014; and Vitaly Naumkin, “Russia Steps Up Its Middle East Policy,” *Al-Monitor*, December 11, 2014, available at <www2.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/12/russia-middle-east-policy-palestine-israel.html?utm_source=Al-Monitor+Newsletter+%5BEnglish%5D&utm_campaign=01b0bc734e-December_12_2014&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_28264b27a0-01b0bc734e-102428765#>

³⁸² Igor Gashkov, “ISIL’s Caucasus Trail. Two Thousand of Our Compatriots Are Fighting on the Side of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta Online*, December 3, 2014. The conference on “Security in the Caucasus—in the Interests of the Peoples of the Region” was held on November 18, 2014. Not long after, the Russian Foreign Ministry would put the number at “over 800,” and Aleksandr Bortnikov, director of the Russian Federal Security Service, at “at least” 1,700. See “Foreign

Ministry: Over 800 of Russians fighting for ISIL,” *Interfax*, January 16, 2015; and Vladimir Mukhin, “Caliphate’ Threatens North Caucasus. Insurgency Already Using ISIL Slogans in Simmering Conflicts in Southern Russia,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta Online*, March 2, 2015.

³⁸³ Author’s conversations in Moscow, September 2014.

³⁸⁴ “Commentary by the Department of Information and the Press of the Russian Foreign Ministry on the U.S. Air Strikes on Terrorist Positions in Syria and Iraq,” September 24, 2014, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>; and “UN Antiterrorist Resolution Issue of ‘Fundamental Importance’—Russia’s Lavrov,” *Interfax*, September 24, 2014.

³⁸⁵ Author’s conversations in Moscow, July 2011–February 2014. Also see, for example, Fedor Lukyanov, “Side Success,” *Gazeta.ru*, November 21, 2013; and Vladimir Sotnikov in Andrey Polunin, “Geneva Agreements: Breakthrough or Historic Mistake?” *Svobodnaya Pressa* (svpressa.ru), November 25, 2013.

³⁸⁶ A.I. Shumilin (lead author), I.S. Ivanov (chief editor), *Russia and the “New Elites” of the Arab Spring Countries: Possibilities and Prospects for Interaction: Working Notebook* [Россия и «новые элиты» стран «Арабской весны»: возможности и перспективы взаимодействия: рабочая тетрадь] (Moscow: Spetskniga, 2013), 36. To this could also be added Russia’s largely derivative membership in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process Quartet; participation in the P5+1 on the Iranian nuclear issue; and co-equal lead with the United States in the Geneva Syrian peace process.

³⁸⁷ See, for example, “Lavrov Speech at the Event Dedicated to 70 years of the Moscow Conference,” October 25, 2013, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

³⁸⁸ Author’s conversation in Moscow, February 2014.

³⁸⁹ The matter of ruling out the threat of force against Iran is an old issue for Russia. Russia does not have a problem with putting more pressure on Iran, as long as it is twinned with engagement and not the threat of force and isolation. When the UNSC passed its first resolution on the Iranian nuclear program, Moscow made sure it excluded any Chapter VII, Article 42, threat of force (Parker, *Persian Dreams*, 250, 270). Russia has been consistent on this point over the years, and all the subsequent resolutions on Iran have been bounded by the original resolution’s noninvocation of Article 42.

³⁹⁰ Author’s conversations in Moscow, February 2013 and February 2014; and Aleksey Nikolsky, “Russian Naval Presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Problem of Projected Naval Basing,” *Moscow Defense Brief* 40, no. 2 (2014), 5–8.

³⁹¹ Galeotti.

³⁹² See her box score of wins and loses in Tatyana Stanovaya, “A Year Since EuroMaydan: What Has Russia Gained and Lost?” *Slon.ru*, November 21, 2014, available at <http://slon.ru/russia/god_posle_evromaydana_chto_priobrela_i_proigrala_rossiya-1187020.xhtml>.

³⁹³ “Вводом войск в Крым Россия нарушила главную норму современного международного права: Применять сила имеет право только Америка!”

³⁹⁴ “Вышла книга с полным перечнем стран, которые не любят Россию. Она называется *Большой атлас мира*.”

³⁹⁵ Lavrov afterwards stated, “I hope that our Americans partners, after they have analyzed the results of the talks with Kerry, will take steps to resume collaboration. We are prepared for this.” See interview with Lavrov by Nikolay Dolgopolov and Yevgeniy Shestakov, “Business Breakfast: Major Note,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta Online*, May 18, 2015.

³⁹⁶ Author's conversation in Moscow, May 2015.

³⁹⁷ The "BRICS" grouping of five emerging economic powers consists of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

³⁹⁸ Michael Birnbaum, "The Plunging Price of Oil Is Causing Russia Deeper Pain Than Western Sanctions," *Washington Post*, December 3, 2014; Neil MacFarquhar and Andrew E. Kramer, "With Russia on Brink of Recession, Putin Faces 'New Reality,'" *New York Times*, December 3, 2014; and Anders Aslund, "The Russian Economy Is Heading Toward Disaster," Peterson Institute for International Economics, December 8, 2014, available at <<http://blogs.piie.com/realtim/?p=4644>>.

³⁹⁹ Anders Aslund, "Russia's Output Will Slump Sharply in 2015," *The American Interest*, January 15, 2015, available at <www.the-american-interest.com/2015/01/15/russias-output-will-slump-sharply-in-2015/>.

⁴⁰⁰ Anastasiya Bashkatova, "Catastrophe Again Being Predicted for Russia," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta Online*, March 6, 2015.

⁴⁰¹ "IMF worsens Russian economic outlook, GDP to fall 3.8% in 2015," *Interfax*, April 14, 2015; and "World Bank expects lengthy recession in Russia, GDP to fall 3.8% in 2015, 0.3% in 2016," *Interfax*, April 1, 2015.

⁴⁰² "Ulyukayev: economy to slow further in Q2, stabilize in Q3, improve in Q4," *Interfax*, April 22, 2015.

⁴⁰³ "Kudrin expects Russian GDP to shrink 4% in 2015, zero growth in 2016," *Interfax*, June 3, 2015; and "Russian Econ Ministry updates forecast to 2018, leaves 2015 GDP, inflation unchanged," *Interfax*, May 28, 2015.

⁴⁰⁴ "Text of Russian President Vladimir Putin's Remarks at a News Conference Following His State Visit to Turkey on 1 December," *En.Kremlin.ru*, December 2, 2014; Andrew Roth, "Putin, in Defeat, Diverts Pipeline," *New York Times*, December 2, 2014; and Jim Yardley and Jo Becker, "How Putin Forged a Pipeline Deal That Derailed," *New York Times*, December 31, 2014. Russia's Rosatom is also building a nuclear power station in Turkey; see "Russia, Turkey break ground on NPP plant," *Interfax*, April 14, 2015.

⁴⁰⁵ Annie Gowen and Michael Birnbaum, "India in Middle as Suitors U.S., Russia Feud," *Washington Post*, December 11, 2014; and Ellen Barry, "Putin, Shunned by West, Visits India, a Friend Whose Interests May Lie Elsewhere," *New York Times*, December 11, 2014.

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⁴⁰⁹ "Remarks by moderator of the Inter-Syrian Moscow meeting Vitaly Naumkin at a news conference, Moscow, January 29, 2015," January 31, 2015, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

⁴¹⁰ "MOSCOW PLATFORM—Provisions on which mutual agreement was reached at the second intra-Syrian consultative meeting, Moscow, 9 April 2015," April 11, 2015, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

⁴¹¹ Somini Sengupta, “UN’s Syria Envoy Looks to Revive Talks,” *New York Times*, April 15, 2015. As described earlier, Geneva 1 took place in late June 2012 and Geneva 2 in late January–early February 2014.

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⁴¹⁶ “Iran Says Ready To Work on Strategic Cooperation Proposal With Russia,” *Islamic Republic News Agency* (www.irna.ir), June 4, 2015.

⁴¹⁷ On combatant fatigue, see Anne Barnard, “Vanguard of Syrian Uprising, Now on the Run, Weighs a Bleak Future,” *New York Times*, January 2, 2015.

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⁴²⁴ Read together, these three analyses are suggestive of current trends: Fedor Lukyanov, “Apologia of Unspoken Words,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta Online*, December 24, 2014; “Obama’s Five Key Middle East Battlegrounds in 2015,” *BBC Online*, January 7, 2015; and Vitaly Naumkin, “Russia steps up its Middle East policy,” *Al-Monitor*, December 11, 2014.

⁴²⁵ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with the RBK TV channel on the sidelines of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, St. Petersburg, June 19, 2015,” June 20, 2015, available at <www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/main_eng>.

⁴²⁶ Overall, according to Lukyanov, “Russia will gradually change and fit into the niche that has been assigned to it in the world design—an important player but not a decisive one, independent to the extent that its share of the global economy permits. In other words, extremely moderately.” See Fedor Lukyanov, “Apologia of Unspoken Words,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta Online*, December 24, 2014.

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⁴²⁸ Presentation attended by author in Washington, DC, April 2015. See also Sergey Alekashenko, former Deputy Finance Minister of Russia, “Russia Sanctions One Year On: Do Sanctions Matter?” Policy Memo, Center on Global Interests, March 6, 2015, available at <<http://us8.campaign-archive2.com/?u=58302957030514c7235a5b1a1&id=decfd74553c&e=355db3f006>>; and Sergey Alekashenko, “The Russian Economy in 2050: Heading for Labor-Based Stagnation,” Brookings Institution, April 2, 2015, available at <www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2015/04/02-russia-economy-labor-based-stagnation-aleksashenko>.

⁴²⁹ Brilev interview of Putin.

⁴³⁰ Author’s conversations in Moscow, February and May 2015. A few others seem to share this view. See Nolan Feeney, “Vladimir Putin Wins TIME 100 Reader’s Poll,” *Time*, April 13, 2015, available at <<http://time.com/3820069/time-100-readers-poll-results/?xid=emailshare>>.

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⁴³⁵ Vasily Kashin, “How the West Saved Russia,” *Vedomosti.ru*, November 24, 2014, available at <www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/news/36360161/kak-zapad-spas-putina?full#cut>.

⁴³⁶ Neil MacFarquhar and Andrew E. Kramer, “With Russia on Brink of Recession, Putin Faces ‘New Reality,’” *New York Times*, December 3, 2014; and Michael Birnbaum, “For Russia, Oil Prices Hit Harder Than Sanctions,” *Washington Post*, December 3, 2014.

⁴³⁷ Author’s conversations in Moscow, June and September 2014.

⁴³⁸ Ellen Barry, “Russia Hard-liners Relish Crimea Crisis. Some Eyeing New Cold War,” *New York Times*, March 16, 2014.

⁴³⁹ For an overview of Russian-Turkish relations, see Trenin, “The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry.”

⁴⁴⁰ Interview with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, “Turkey Does Not Recognize Russia’s Crimea Annexation,” *Anadolu Agency Online*, January 14, 2015.

⁴⁴¹ “Telephone conversation with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan,” *En.Kremlin.ru*, March 4, 2014; and “Turkey’s Erdogan, Russia’s Putin Talk Ukraine on Phone,” *Anadolu Agency Online*, May 30, 2014. Erdogan was sworn in as Turkey’s first directly elected president on August 28 after elections on August 10, 2014.

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⁴⁴⁵ “Turkey Says Russia Ready to Improve Rights of Crimean Tatars—Russian President Putin in Visit to Turkey as He and Turkish President Erdogan Hold Joint Press Conference Monday on Bilateral Relations and Crises in Ukraine and Syria,” *Anadolu Agency Online*, December 1, 2014.

⁴⁴⁶ Semih Idiz, “Erdogan delicate balancing act in Kiev,” *Al-Monitor*, March 24, 2015, available at <www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/turkey-russia-ukraine-balancing-act-kiev.html>.

⁴⁴⁷ Alexei Malashenko, “Islam in Russia,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, September 23, 2014, available at <<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Islam-in-Russia-17002>>; and “A Hard Year for Migrant Workers in Russia,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 27, 2013, available at <www.rferl.org/content/russia-migrants-tough-year/25214624.html>.

⁴⁴⁸ According to Lev Gudkov of the Levada-Center, there had been 360–370 incidents similar to Biryulovo in 2013. Gudkov, however, did not attribute these incidents to Russian xenophobia, but to disgust with corruption and other seamy features of life in Russia. Lev Gudkov interview with Kseniya Larina and Vitaly Dymarskiy, “The Russia That the Majority Chooses—Which Is It?” *Echo Moskvy*, June 20, 2014, available at <www.echo.msk.ru/programs/year2014/1343750-echo/>.

⁴⁴⁹ Three months into the Ukraine crisis, another incident took place in the Moscow region town of Pushkino after a young Russian soccer fan was killed by an Uzbek migrant on May 13. See “The Pogrom’s Fellow Travelers: ‘The Russian Spring’ Can Be Aimed Against Russia Itself,” *Gazeta.ru*, May 15, 2014, available at <www.gazeta.ru/comments/2014/05/16_e_6036425.shtml>.

⁴⁵⁰ Presentation attended by author in Washington, DC, November 2013.

⁴⁵¹ “Russians on Migration and Tension Between Nationalities,” Levada-Center, November 5, 2013, available at <www.levada.ru/05-11-2013/rossiyane-o-migratsii-i-mezhnatsionalnoi-napryazhennosti>.

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⁴⁵⁶ Kashin, “How the West Saved Russia.”

⁴⁵⁷ Transcript of Putin’s speech and answers to questions at the October 24 Valday Discussion Club in Sochi, Russia, “Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club,” *En.Kremlin.ru*, October 28, 2014.

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